Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

TRAVELS IN TEFLONIA

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

TRAVELS IN TEFLONIA

BILL ROBY

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

Copyright © 2010 Bill Roby

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

Cover Illustration, 'Waiting For The Bus In Livithi,' by Bill Roby.

Matador
5 Weir Road
Kibworth Beauchamp
Leicester LE8 0LQ, UK
Tel: (+44) 116 279 2299
Fax: (+44) 116 279 2277
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador

ISBN 978 1848 764 170

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11pt Palatino by Troubador Publishing Ltd, Leicester, UK

Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

To Giovanni

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page 7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Peter Wood whose idea it was that I should 'write a book,' and without whose encouragement this book would probably never have been written.

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

CONTENTS

A treasure in the attic 1

The first TEFL course in Manchester 12

First summer of teaching, at the Runneymead School, Southport 18

Arriving to teach on the Peloponnese 34

Finding my way around Greek life 43

Returning to Runneymede School 55

Mr. Donks and the silver Mercedes 73

Finding a second teaching job in Turin 85

The pull of Turin and 'La Dolce Vita' 105

A further TEFL course in Manchester 115

Out to Portugal for work with a wizard car alarm 128

Porto and friends false and faithful 136

Life in Porto, sliding down the learning curve 157

TEFL on the borders and going solo 174

Twenty years on, and a reprise of summer school 186

Prelims_BR_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:29 Page

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 1

A treasure in the attic

Growing up as a small boy there was one place in our house which I always liked to visit – the attic.

In the attic were to be found untold wonders of impossible invention, at least that's how it seemed to the eyes of a child. There was a cigarette machine which, perhaps fittingly, no longer dispensed cigarettes; a bizarre oblong-shaped circuit board with a ring-bearing handle of chrome-plated stainless steel dangling from its side, the idea being to negotiate your way around the spaghetti junction of the circuit board without touching the wires, an almost impossible task, inevitably resulting in some ear-splitting electronic screech as the contraption registered its contempt. As if that wasn't enough, two one-armed bandits lay at kilter against the broad wooden beams that supported the house, next to a slick pin-ball machine whose gleamingly metallic cymbals and flippers competed against a backdrop of impossible designs.

This was the scene in the attic of 20 Walmesley Road, the house where I grew up in the Nineteen Sixties and Seventies.

But here in this family jungle of junk what most vividly stays in my mind was the object always to be found somewhere under the stingingly fierce fibreglass sheets insulating the house – a wedge-shaped, royal blue, plastic vinyl-coated cushion. Only this was no ordinary cushion, it was in fact a primitive car headrest. It was professionally upholstered and, as best I can remember it, had two prong-like stainless steel rods running down from its head to a finial of brackets and wing nuts (obviously the thing had to be attached to the car seat somehow!) If the other things in the attic were not quite space-age, this uncategorizable object most definitely was.

I have no proof that this object – which by today's standards would probably be deemed a croquet hoop with regulation blue buffer to stop dangerous deflections of the ball – belonged anywhere in the history of our family, let alone the world. It simply existed, there in the attic, one of an assortment of exotica and family heirlooms that lay testimony to my family's attempts, and especially my father's attempts, to stay the late Fifties and early Sixties economic austerity which, despite MacMillan's observation that 'you've never had it so good,' seemed that whatever 'it' was, we hadn't had it.

Yet it was surely from here that my fascination for invention stemmed. Unbeknown to me at the time, this Treasure Island of the attic with its Blue Beard's car headrest secreted under the sandy fibreglass panels of the house, had remained vivid in my mind, planting the thought that to invent something is not beyond

the bounds of possibility for ordinary mortals, and quite possibly spurring me on in my dreams of travel also.

But all indication from school reports were that I was not scientifically enquiring, much less gifted, and that if I had any gift at all it was to draw.

Well that was a start you can believe, and why it was that at eighteen I went to study Social History at Loughborough University I cannot tell you. That time seemed, looking back, like a study in syrup, turning over in essays and dissertations the sweet thoughts of the great and the good (and the downright nasty!) of ages gone by until, to this writer's mind at least, all that was left at the end was syrup – a kind of syrup in the head that is, and one leaving little room for inventiveness and originality of thought.

This syrup however was sweet because it was a qualification, an honours degree in the Social Sciences in my case, and you needed a degree to get a job – in fact in Margaret Thatcher's Britain of 1981 (the year I graduated) you needed a degree *not* to get a job, to make it look as though it was the system that was at fault, not you.

I therefore have Margaret Thatcher to thank for my being more or less press-ganged into working for the family business, which was a hairdressing and beauty accessories company, within a year of graduation.

This was not what I wanted. Instead I had visions of landing a job in journalism and travelling the world at somebody's expense. It is therefore perplexing even to me that just before throwing in the towel and joining

the family firm, I thought that the best way to realise this was to get a job on the St.Helens Reporter.

The editor, who I'd been told was a distant relative by my mother, was keen to stress that this wasn't a job interview, just a 'chat.' Well he may have felt comfortable putting the parameters of the meeting in such non-committal terms himself, which is probably why I began the 'chat' with the revelation that did he know that he and I were related?

Unsurprisingly I did not get the job on the St.Helens Reporter, but if anything the experience taught me that perhaps I wasn't reporter material after all, the only problem was that I didn't know exactly what I was cut out for.

The question of where my true calling lay was soon set to one side as I grappled with the first rungs of the ladder of the family firm. Typically this would involve what my father described to me as, 'watching what people did.'

I was of course a general dog's body on the factory floor. Me and the family dog, Seamus, who was daily freighted up to the factory, seemingly in unison in wondering, 'when will all this be over so I can stretch out in front of the fire at home?'

To say that work uninspired me was like saying that Holland was flat. Besides, following my father's instructions seemed just to tell me that people moved their hands, not what they did with them.

Nevertheless there were some clear job specifications attached to my status as recruit to the working world. Grading patterns was one of them, taking a size 20

women's overall, for example (an unusually large size), and grading it down to an 18, or a 16, and so forth, right down to a size 8 – much lower than that and it was just perfect for Sweet Pea.

The omnipresent shape of my mother gliding up and down a line of sewers, checking hems, or unpicking a badly stitched line from a new girl (who must have thought she was suddenly expected to become Edward Scissorhand's sister overnight) was something that made me feel uncomfortable. I felt as if I was *of* the workplace but not precisely being in it. College had crowded out my mind with ideas I now saw as useless. I mean, what had Karl Marx's 'dialectical materialism' to do with a delivery of material in bay one?

While my parent's business drew its name from my mother's first name, Florence, it was at its origins as, 'Hairfriend Products' that the enterprise loomed largest in my life.

The reality was that Hairfriend Products, from its humble inception with the dropping off of 'out work' in domestic sewers' homes around St.Helens, had eventually blossomed into a factory in Knowsley, just outside Liverpool.

'*The factory*' became my father's own personal ashram, sometimes he would go there even when there was no work to do.

My mother often threatened to have his bed moved up there to save him the bother of commuting.

The early years growing up with Haifriend Products are most vivid in my mind. Vinyl would be laid out on an extended dining-room table in our front room where

it would be cut out using hardboard circles, at first with scissors then, years later, with an electric disk saw. These were the shower caps.

Plastic baskets would then sag with these strange fish as you delivered them to the outworkers, who were also, it would seem, 'friends of the hair.' Then a few days later you'd pick them up again, by which time they'd all been transformed into beautiful shower caps. (I can't see one now without picturing a venn diagram of their production in my mind's eye.)

But the early years of Hairfriend Products were also exciting for the gallery of strange characters you met. Often during holiday time, or perhaps even not, I'd escort my mother to Manchester or Liverpool on some textile-sourcing mission. The name 'Cotton Goods' figures large in my recollections.

Cotton Goods almost took on the same familiarity as the phrase 'uncle Arthur' might, and indeed to all intents and purposes – to my thoughts then – Cotton Goods was, if not a person, a place – a country were cotton was king!

Sam Meir was one such character that my mother occasionally called on with me in tow. 'Mr. Meir,' as I was fiercely told to address him, was an Orthodox Jew who had a cramped warehouse just off Cross Street in Manchester. The warehouse wasn't cramped because it was so small, but because it was so choc-o-bloc with bolts of cloth. Each roll of cloth was consigned to its chute, like an armoury of torpedoes, pigeon-holed into tagged silos.

'Ah, Mrs Roby,' he would say, always brimming

with light-hearted joviality and giving free reign to his salesman's banter, 'What can I do for you today…seer-sucker…? … twenty denier nylon?… or we've got a very nice line just in… prime polyester cotton in pink gingham?'

My mother demurred and let this onslaught of what was really highly-honed sales talk wash over her. At least once I remember her buying some material and confiding in me later , 'I didn't really want that you know?'

Sam Meir was also fond of weird, surreal stories, way before Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected* I suspect.

'Ah, Mrs Roby,' wailed Mr Meir one day, 'I've just got back from Jerusalem where my friend is very sick.'

'Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that Mr. Meir. What's up with him?'

'Cancer, Mrs Roby… it's terrible… terrible… the doctors have given him only six months to live.'

'Oh dear!' sympathized Mother.

'Yes, Mrs Roby… yes… and do you know Mrs Roby,' he said hoisting a weary arm lightly into the air, 'do you know that when I was in Jerusalem I was so worried about my friend I slipped a letter into the Wailing Wall… saying I hope he gets better.'

'That's nice,' said Mother brightening.

'Yes, but do you know Mrs Roby, I just got back from Jerusalem last Thursday and I heard he's died.' You could have heard the proverbial pin drop. 'Now what can I get for you today Mrs Roby?' said Mr. Meir jauntily, dismissing in an instant his morbid demeanour.

Another businessman who occasionally supplied my parents with textiles was located on the fifth floor of

a very tall, imposing Victorian edifice on Manchester's select Princes Street. This was the office of Mr. Souflias.

Mr. Souflias was Greek and always dressed in suits, more often than not seemingly in pin-stripes. He had an olive complexion and an ample bush of tight black curly hair, making him look as though he belonged more on a Greek island than inside some dour metropolitan office under grey Mancunian skies. He had the habit of constantly sweeping his brow with his finger tips, as though each question had jogged some cruel recollection of something he had left undone.

'Ah, yes Mrs Roby… I'll see if I can get that for you… I'll do my best.'

Mr. Souflias with his silver Mercedes was definitely where Hairfriend Products rubbed shoulders with the high-flying, exotic world of business, one with prospects open to small, struggling companies that really worked hard.

It was some years later on what must have been my very last trip of this kind with my mother, as I was eighteen and due to start university that autumn, that we received some shocking news about Mr. Souflias.

The revelation was undoubtedly at my prompting since at another firm in the city, whose name I cannot now remember, my mother suddenly asked-

'Oh, yes Andrew… and how's Mr. Souflias?'

He looked startled and gave two glances. 'Mr. Souflias… he's dead… committed suicide.' said Andrew.

Last, but not least, among the gallery of remarkable characters that could be encountered while on the road with Hairfriend Products was without doubt Pat.

'Pat' never 'Patricia' and her husband Chris had a flourishing hair and beauty products wholesale warehouse in Solihull, Birmingham called 'Chorleton's.'

Chorleton's were among the traders who bought most from my parents and it was therefore necessary to, 'keep them warm,' as my father liked to refer to the business of ingratiating oneself to important people as. Yet Pat and Chris' appearance in my parents' lives (in the former case, it was more 'disappearance') had one outstanding peculiarity. It was as Chris put it to my father one day, who could never understand anybody being anti-social without reason, that Pat didn't like, '*being seen*.'

What this boiled down to was that Pat was reluctant to be seen by people on account of her weight, which was excessive. At least that was the reason that Chris gave out, though I suspected my father mistrusted it, and when one considers it – what a perfect way not to be bothered by anyone in business. I think increasingly over the years it frustrated my father not being able to see Pat, rather like Dorothy denied access to the Wizard of Oz.

These were just some of the people your life touched tangentially upon under the umbrella of Hairfriend Products, and when finally I came to work for the firm for a few years after college, looking back, it's the people I remember most, and hardly anything about the day to day running of the business.

As the Eighties wore on I became never so aware that time was slipping away and I wasn't doing what I wanted to do most – travel and see a bit of the world.

Yet how to trade bolts of cloth for bolts of lightning, and the excitement of seeing foreign shores lit up in an electrical storm? That's how I would probably have framed it at that time, and that was the central problem of my life.

I suppose a watershed moment, quite literally, was one day around 1985 when I was sent on the road selling overalls for the firm. This particular day I was visiting Southport.

Southport was a stepping stone to a beckoning career in TEFL (Teaching English As A Foreign Language) when I was twenty-six, and when I would at last see a bit of the world, though of course I did not know it at the time. By this time I think my father's tack with me had changed from, 'watching people's hands,' to, 'watching people's hands move to their cheque books.'

'You get the order,' was the bottom line of selling, said my father, that together with knowing how to 'close' a deal – a phenomenon the Parthenon of whose ancient artistry I can reveal; it includes such gems as – 'So, Mr.Brown… what shall I put you down for…? Shall we say five hundred then?'

Having failed to get any sales that day in Southport I found myself gravitating, almost by some homing mechanism, towards the bracing salt sea air on Southport's looping promenade. The nearby funfair blurted out sounds of a possible other life, and seagulls screeched their promise of the sea and adventure, an adventure which might or might not lead to Treasure Island and Blue Beard's designer-ready car seat headrest.

Summer was at its height so I bought an ice-cream

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

and wandered off, making a bee-line for the beach, where I must have turned many a head as I took off my socks and shoes, scooping the latter up to under my arm and, whisking the socks into a ball, putting those into my jacket pockets, and then rolling my trouser legs up and casually sauntering down to the sands without a care in the world.

Placing my bulky suitcase of samples beside me, and cradling my arms behind my head, I looked up into a never-ending blue of blank canvas.

With the faint chattering of children's voices somewhere in the distance, and the tinny tunes of an ice-cream van now barely audible, I felt the icy waters of the Irish sea lap against my toes telling me, or so it seemed at the time, that a change of career was definitely in the offing.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 2

The first TEFL course in Manchester

In February 1986 I did a TEFL course in Manchester with a view to jumping ship as far as my career course went. This was a week's introductory course and for it I had to find accommodation in Manchester.

Accommodation was a semi-detached house in the Crumpsall district of the city, a short bus ride from where I was doing the course. The young couple I stayed with that week, the Leakeys, were the proud owners of a flock of budgerigars which were penned outside in their overgrown garden, plus one very talkative parrot called Pericles.

The course was intensive (from 9 until 7) and every evening, when I wearily turned the key to the lock and entered into the hall, Pericles would immediately chirp up –

'Good day!'

Oddly if you didn't show any response, such as a gaffaw, he would persist in saying, 'good day!... good day!..good day!' like a bird high on cannabis.

I mentioned this to Felicity and Hugh, the friendly

couple who rented out to strangers, over breakfast one morning.

'Oh, you've got to say good morning back,' said Felicity, seemingly unsurprised by my question, 'that way he'll shut up.'

I gave her a doubtful gaze – I might be fairly open-minded but I drew the line at saying 'good morning' to a parrot, especially when it was the evening.

'Fella's right,' chirped Hugh, who was busily tucking into his breakfast, 'it's all that Paul Hogan's fault of course.'

'Paul Hogan?' I said

'Well, that's what Fella and I called him, his real name was Fraser. He stayed with us last October… while looking up old friends that had moved back to Manchester from Oz.'

'Isn't it usually the other way around?' I asked.

'Ah, family you see Bill!' he said, pivoting a stiff-backed chair acutely backwards on its legs, and with a crescent of burnt toast smeared with marmalade poised in his hand, suddenly taking a munch of that and making it disappear, as though he were some wildlife wonder himself.

'Fraser taught Pericles all sorts of bad language, didn't he Fella?', said Hugh, throwing her a world-weary look. 'Like, Like you're kecks cobber!'

'Kecks?' I said. 'But that's a Scouse' (Liverpudlian) 'slang word for trousers isn't it?'

'I know,' said Hugh, closing his eyes as the ecstasy of the last lingering taste of marmalade trickled down his gullet. 'He got that from a bloke from Birkenhead

who had a night job at the Midland Hotel, cleaning the kitchens he was.'

'A case of the koala meeting Lilly Savage,' said Felicity with a conspiratorial giggle.

'Then there was… oy, your flies undone!' went on Hugh, '… well not *oy* because he can't manage that, but you get the picture?' I nodded.

Felicity sprayed the table with atom of coffee. 'Hugh!'

'It's true!,' he said. 'The only thing is… that parrot's clearly thick since he can't distinguish between male and female.'

Felicity rocked backwards, laughing helplessly in her chair.

'He says it when a woman walks past wearing a skirt,' said Hugh.

'… Or a Scotsman wearing a kilt,' interjected Felicity.

'I mean, it really doesn't show much intelligence does it…? more coffee Bill?' said Hugh.

'No thanks.'

'In fact to tell you the truth, I'm thinking of getting him stuffed.'

'Hugh!' screamed Felicity.

The parrot issued some indecipherable string of syllables from out in the hallway, which was muffled by the walls – perhaps it wasn't that unintelligent after all.

'Anyway,' said Felicity, 'don't know who's the thick one... Pericles is a *she*.'

Hugh knocked over the sugar bowl, either by accident or in anger, 'Oh, yeah… I forgot… we had this ornithologist guy staying with us last week, and he was

a mine of information about that bird… even told us what part of Madagascar he probably came from,' Felicity threw him an arch look. '… what he would have eaten … when his mating season was… *he* should have been called Pericles,' said Hugh, rising to get ready for his day job, which was odd-job decorating. 'Still, the parrot had the last laugh,' said Hugh, humping on a bulky check jacket.

'Oh, really?' I said.

'Yes, the day the ornithologist left Pericles came out with a new word… no sooner had he closed the door when he said… dickhead!'

'*Hugh!*' – Felicity repeated her spraying of atom of coffee.

The bus ride into Manchester city centre was a good opportunity to study the incidence of bald heads amongst young men my age. Having noticed a bald patch the size of a mallard's egg on my own crown, I was eager to console myself that I was not the only one going bald. So as bald heads dipped off the bus, occasionally their bald patches reflecting in the glass, it would give me a sudden lift – oh well, I'm not as bald as him!

The rooms were the course was held were high up in some sensible-looking Victorian edifice. The tsunami of odd personalities that had been swept up on the shoreline of discovering a new career were at first alarming – a divorced mother who wanted to teach in Guatemala for some strange reason now her kids were 'grown up'; an Oxford graduate, about my age, who

didn't know what to do with his life, only that he didn't want to spend it teaching in the conventional sense; a man with a face like a burnt Battle of Britain pilot who'd already spent five years teaching in Ghana; then there was me – the salesman drawn to seashores who wanted to travel beyond them.

I remember little of the content of the course, as ever it was the personalities and their traits that stuck in the mind. What I do remember is returning after the course on a train from Manchester Piccadilly to Liverpool Lime Street and falling into animated conversation with an attractive, slight girl, who was also a Northerner like me. I must have fallen into a fugue-like state, and the journey passed with gales of laughter and a prevalent sense of a burgeoning 'somethingness,' as Wodehouse would no doubt have said.

I know I must have been keen since I got her address when the journey ended. Like lots of incidents in my life, and never so much with girls, I sometimes chose a 'walk-away' approach which even to this day mystifies me.

Back at Hairfriend Products I was buoyed up by a feeling that I would soon be doing something that more suited my abilities, and sure enough, on the strength of the TEFL course I had just taken, along with my degree, I went down to London and was immediately offered a job with 'Teachers For Greece.'

Teachers For Greece placed people all over Greece, from the mainland to the islands, and while having a slight preference for the islands, I was nevertheless satisfied to be allocated to a school in Tripolis (also

called Tripoli) on the Peloponnese. (Why jobs on the islands were so difficult to land I cannot say – perhaps their tenures were jealously guarded by year-round leisure larks and so never came up?)

But I had several months to fill in before departing for Greece in the August, and it was still only April. I'd been advised to seek more experience teaching with a summer school on the TEFL course and so it was, that in July of that year, 1986, I started teaching English at the Runneymede School in Southport.

Destiny's child had come full circle, and the man who traipsed the sands of Southport with a garment samples briefcase just a few years previously had done a quick change on the sands (not literally!) and walked up the high strand donning seaweed-encrusted tweeds (again not literally), and was fired with a strong desire to teach, had a knowledge of the deviant abilities of certain linguistic parrots, and little else besides.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 3

First summer of teaching at Runneymede School, Southport

A couple of days before the summer course started all we teachers were called to an emergency meeting at Runneymede school owing to an unforeseen contingency.

The surprising news that greeted us was that we would be having a visiting party of VIPs on the course – the two sons of the then Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe González.

We were told that we'd all been checked by MI5, so were presumably as white as Persil, otherwise the question has to be asked – would we be there? Understandably, with ETA a concern, security was high and so my initiation into the world of TEFL was made that little bit more exciting by overtones of James Bond.

In the course of my five week's work at Runneymede I got to know José from Madrid (if that was his real name?), a smiling undercover agent who claimed to be a black belt in Karate, and who was human enough to accompany we teachers to social events in Southport. (On reflection perhaps we were the ones being guarded!)

The Gonzalez boys, Pablo and Eduardo, were shuffled around the teachers, and so sooner or later we all got the chance to teach them. In terms of TEFL this perhaps didn't mean much, but when it came to name-dropping, there was always the possibility of , '… of course I remember when I was teaching…'

There was also a large party of school children from Turin. It was amongst this group that I met Maria-Teresa Morrelli, someone who has become a real friend over the years and who, many years later, along with her husband Georgio, visited me and my young family in Portugal.

'The grammar… it's very important, no Bill?, asked Maria-Teresa. I returned a blank stare. You've got to remember that at this green stage in my TEFL career I wasn't so sure that grammar *was* important – surely words individually were more important weren't they? – I had a lot to learn. Also tied in here was, and is, my love of poetry, which tells me that expressions of feelings don't always correspond to grammatical or syntactical accuracies. I was not to know it at the time but my TEFL experience has taught me that more often than not students look more to Punchinello for an English teacher, not Percy Bysche Shelley.

The Runneymede school boasted a grand staircase down which an ermined dame might have suitably descended, a sort of Dame Edna Everidge uprooted to out in the sticks. Faces from the past peered imperiously down from oil portraits on the walls and the heavy concoction of *eau de carpets* permeated the air.

The school was a warren of surprises. It even had a

wine cellar, though its purpose had long since been converted to housing overhead projectors and the like, along with the school's excess supply of wonky chairs, of which there were plenty. A determined Indiana Jones could have willingly set about shining a light on the darkest undisturbed recesses of Runneymede School and never come out.

The day before students arrived we had one last pep talk with Rory, the dynamic and affable owner of 'Points West,' the summer school group whom Runneymede, which was normally an All-Boys Independent school year round, had kindly leashed its premises out to for the summer. It was Rory's responsibility, he told us, to see that all the foreign students had a wonderful time in all the company's centres – oh, and to learn English.

'Any questions?' said Rory, beaming around the ramshackle room at Runneymede, combing faces for any last minute misgivings.

'Do students like writing compositions?', asked Pixie (I never discovered if it was her real name), a bedraggled-looking Art student with purple-dyed spiky hair and a crescent of earrings down one lobe like a miniature set of false teeth. Bet she didn't dress like that at interview, I thought.

'It depends what you get them to write,' said Rory, breaking into a fresh smile, as though fielding questions on any subject under the sun was his speciality.

'Oral sex?' said Pixie. There was a sharp collective intake of breath.

'Well… no… not exactly,' replied Rory, knitting his

eyebrows. 'That is one area I hope you would not broach,' he said, delivering a saccharine smile.

'Oh, right,' she said, tossing her head.

'How can they write compositions when they don't know English?' – this was Shirley, a serious-minded young state school teacher from Milton Keynes.

'Good question!', bellowed Rory. 'Now that,' he said emphatically, pointing a finger at nobody in particular, 'is your job… by the time they've finished at Runneymede, we want them writing *War and Peace*!'

'But that's a chronicle of misery and suffering,' offered up Benedict, a tall, dapper Engineering graduate with straw-like blonde hair who'd just come down from Herriot-Watt University – literally on the train I mean. 'I mean, surely you'd want them to be writing stories about golden fields and romantic idylls like… like…,' he hesitated, whether because being an engineer he was struggling to construct the right sentences I do not know.

'Like…'

'Underage pregnancies?' blurted out Pixie again.

Mike, a P.E. teacher by the day job, but Course Manager here, eagerly jotted down notes on the notepad poised on his lap.

'*Will last five minutes*…' probably.

'I was going to say *The Blue Lagoon*,' said Benedict at last.

'That's porno isn't it?' butted in Tracy.

Tracy was a cherubic and cheerful girl from just down the road in Liverpool. Tracy had an accent so acute you could practically slide down it. 'It's dead sad if we're doing porno,' she grumbled.

'Now come on you lot,' said Rory testily, starting to bring out his slightly less sunny side, and giving air to his by now noticeable Irish accent,'… I know the kids will be going through the hormones, but your main concern will be impregnating them with the seed of English.' Ooops – An unfortunate turn of phrase I thought.

Rory tilted his head slightly to the ceiling, to where he seemed to be studying a stuccoed rosette, and to everyone's amazement waxed lyrically –

'Caught in that sensual music all neglect… monuments of unageing intellect.' He turned his face to the by now gobsmacked teachers. 'William Butler Yeats… a fellow countryman you know.' He flashed some parallel bar gymnastics over some tables before settling into his pep talk again.

'You see, you should use all means at your disposal to inspire the kids… remember you are ambassadors for your country… and remember, above all,' he said, shooting his arm up in the air, as though asking to answer his own question, '… teach up!'

An eerie silence descended. This was because nobody quite knew what 'teach up' meant. Rory answered by way of instinct.

'Teach up means stretch them beyond their limits… pitch your classes to the ablest student, not the least able.'

We foregathered teachers, about twelve of us in number, must have resembled a herd of masticating cows. Most were probably thinking what I was thinking – just to teach wouldn't be so bad.

'What if the mean ability level is well below your prepared classes?' asked Shirley, ever one to spot the flaw in any argument.

'Ah, good question,' said Rory, beaming again. 'In that case you will have to teach *down*.'

Teach up, teach down, clearly my five weeks at Runneymede were going to be more than interesting.

The day of the students' arrival was predictably chaotic, and you could have guessed that without reading *War and Peace.*

The iron-smelling school gymnasium had been allocated as the place to take all the students' names and get them into class. The noise level rose incrementally until it seemed that all the world's languages were competing with one another for sheer volubility.

'Q-U-I-E-T!' boomed Mike, without his namesake, a mic. The normally mild-mannered Mike, poor fellow, was turning red in the face. 'We'll start as we mean to go on,' he said, gaining composure, '… you have to obey my instructions… and that includes piping down and pining your ears back when I'm speaking to you is that clear?'

Students oggled him incomprehensively – he might as well have been singing, '*Gilly, gilly, ossenfeffer, katzenellen Bogen by the se-e-e-a*' for all that they understood him. However, all credit to Mike, who would have been far happier getting the new intake running six times round the school.

During those five weeks at Runneymede I got to know the school like a castaway might familiarise

himself with the desert island upon which he finds himself marooned.

The central grand staircase funnelled teachers and students alike off into a warren of classrooms. This plan was more or less mirrored identically upstairs, except that there the floorboards crept, and the skylights lent the enclosed space an airy and light ambience, as though devised by some forward-thinking funeral director who wanted to buck a trend.

Above the second floor were the rooms housed in the rafters. These were only ever used for remedial classes in English, where the no-hopers would be distracted with games like *Happy Families, Yahtzee* and *Kerplunk*. Downstairs, in the west wing of the building, were the kitchens, where a huddle of coal-black oven ranges filled rooms, and where a prowling Mrs Bridges-type character stomped around in a pinafore and hat, looking as though she would rather be in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta than slaving away in the kitchens. It was to this lady that an apology was due whenever rebellious students flitted away to the kitchens and had to be retrieved, as they occasionally did – perhaps it was the hypnotic effect of the smell of custard?

'You're not allowed here!' she would yell at you whenever you appeared – as if it was your fault!

One of the pleasanter parts of the school were the gardens at the rear, where a vast expanse of green lawn, here and there steeped with surprise rockeries, met the eye. To the far extremity of this lawn lay a sunken tennis court somewhat the worse for wear. To the east of the rear garden stood a light-filled Victorian

conservatory, all white inside, as though inviting someone with a boater and blazer to enter in. It was stuffed full of plants and other exotica, such as majolica vases, groaning with wisteria and aspidistra. A quick skip over the mouldy fencing, marking the perimeter of the school grounds, brought you out on to the oddly named, 'Rotten Row,' which led to Southport's busy sea-front thoroughfare.

The geography of the school was nothing compared to the geography of remembering where students came from. There were the students from Seville, most of whom, especially the girls, wanted to dance at every opportunity, either that or cook *tortilla* (basically scrambled eggs with potato thrown in uninvited), and if they couldn't get you to eat that, they would try to insist that you at least used it as the basis for an English class with them. Then there were the Italian students. They were easily spotted meandering along Southport's long and imposing Lord Street, Southport's main shopping area, a sudden shriek or squeal of delight denoting their position more accurately than any GPS, or Global Positioning System, could. Next came the French, much smaller in number, and always wanting to know where '*the bonk*' was – a dilemma difficult to understand as Lord Street is full of '*bonks*,' or 'banks' as we call them.

For some reason 'the monument', a huge white marble mausoleum-type block of stone on Lord Street, was designated as the local meeting-up place for all students, the ideal hang-out for a bit of canoodling. Many a holiday romance must have blossomed and

withered around Southport's breezy sea-front and the monument.

Students had their 'families,' with whom they were billeted with around the town. This practice was almost universally successful, with families often giving their guests lavish presents when they left, and vice-versa. Of course there were always the exceptions. One girl stole from her family, on another occasion the family stole from the girl. One particularly morose and haughty student from the United Arab Emirates even refused to eat with his family, and speech it seems was similarly rationed.

Generally though, the lodging system worked well, and at any one time the school was only ever the torture chamber in some students' eyes, a place to be dragged unwillingly to every morning where classes began at 9 am sharp.

Summer school always provided the unexpected. I remember one day a small boy of about ten called Saeed rushing into the teachers' room waiving his arms frantically in the air. 'Michael!... Michael! … Michael!' he screamed.

Mike, not a man to be easily flustered, simply asked the boy what he wanted.

'Books!... books!' shouted Saeed excitedly, flailing his arms about in ever increasing agitation.

'What's he chunnering about?' piped up Nick, who at fifty-seven was the oldest teacher and a mine of information on summer school misdemeanours, past and present.

'Ah, I know what he wants…' said Mike phlegmatically. Wearily he heaved himself up out of his

armchair and went over to a sideboard which was filled with course books and other teaching clutter. 'He wants books… nothing difficult about that!' And so, hodding a dozen books or so over from the sideboard to where the little boy stood, he abruptly let them drop into the latter's by now reflexively operating outstretched arms. Saeed wobbled for a bit under the strain then, putting the books down with difficulty, said –

'No… no… Michael… books!... books!,' He stabbed the air with his fists. '*BOOKS*!'

'Well you've got your books now young man,' said Mike, slapping his hands together as though the subject was closed, and looking very pleased with himself at his powers of divination. But Saeed would not let the matter drop.

'Books!... books…!' continued Saeed, '… books! Books…!'

'Are you sure it's books he wants?' said Nick, who was beginning to look doubtful.

By now the little boy was springing around the room like a kangaroo shadow-boxing. 'Look… books!.. books!' said Saeed, trying to demonstrate his meaning with his fists.

'Crickey …!' blurted Nick, he means *box* Mike, not books… students fighting!... quick, come on!'

We all sped to the door to break up the fisty-cuffs, which was between Faisal and his half-brother Abdul.

'*Books!*' said Mike in disgust, puffing back into the teachers' room when all was calm again.

As the students' study season in England drew to a

close they were treated to a grand finale in the form of a garden party which, I was pleased to discover, was to be held in Runneymede's colour-filled rear garden.

All the students had made their best effort to look a million dollars, which they succeeded in admirably, and with an ease which only Continentals seem fully capable of, while we motley Anglo-Saxons crept up to the occasion with crinkly collars and not so much 'glad' rags as 'sad' rags, at least I did – all except Bendedict, the engineer of course, who let us down by being conspicuously sartorial.

Françoise, the leader of the group from Nantes, gave a virtuoso performance on his flute, excusing himself for a slow, gasping start, explaining that he was always nervous at first, but was fine once he got started. This was a laudable enough excuse, only Cilla, the talkative school's secretary, had nodded off during his warm up, and had spilt sherry all over her newly acquired 'power suit' as she called a striking ensemble she was wearing with runaway Joan Collins shoulder pads (wide shoulders were all the rage for women's jackets in the Eighties), thereby rather spoiling the effect she'd hoped to create.

'Oh, wasn't he good!,' effused Cilla, pretending she'd heard the whole recital when she awoke, and eyeing with surprise the sherry stain on her lapel. 'The French are so musical… just look at Maurice Chevallier!…' she said, smacking her lips on the umpteenth wine glass that made its way to her.

It was Cilla who had the thankless task of keeping tabs on all the students' movements about the school

wherever and whenever possible, for often neither was. Cilla had the odd habit of assuming an understanding of a language that she didn't possess, and would get upperty when students addressed her in non-English.

'But Cilla you don't know what she's saying,' I said to her once, coming between some altercation.

'Yes, but whatever it was she was saying… *I didn't like the tone she was saying it in*,' she said with a rocking horse head of certainty.

The girls from Seville lost no time in turning the garden at the back of Runneymede into some far-flung flamenco dancing contest. Nick followed them orbitally with his eyes for a while, until he said he felt he was getting dizzy and so had better sit down.

Conversation was rife amongst we teachers about the surprises of the course – like how Pixie had even lasted two days before getting fired for doing a class on, 'ten sensible ways for girls not to get pregnant.'

Bendedict, seeming slightly the worse for Sangria – a drink he obviously wasn't used to – announced suddenly that he wanted to sing. Nobody was listening to him, until they had to –

'Oh Shenandoah… I long to see you…,' he began unself-consciously.

'Who the hell's that!' shrieked Mike, pivoting his head around instantly.

'Lo down… you rolling river...'

'He didn't ask me if he could sing,' objected Mike.

'No,' said Nick, cruising up in his yachting pumps and fully recovered now from his dizzy spell, 'only apparently he asked Paloma over there…' he said,

pointing to one of the Seville group leaders, '… and she said he was most welcome.'

'Most welcome!' erupted Mike, sticking his fingers into his ears. 'She'd say yes to anything that woman.'

'At least he's trying,' said Nick, smiling broadly at everyone before going on to examine the various brands of wine that had been bought in bulk from the local off-license, as though worried that they might not be up to scratch, or contain substances that might make some teachers spontaneously sing. I too took a little wander about, mainly to eavesdrop.

'You sing very, very well,' oozed Paloma Velásquez from the Spanish group to Benedict who, beaming broadly, was right on cue – unlike his singing, which wasn't.

'*Muchas gracias*,' he said, in excruciating Spanish.

'De Nada!' (That's nothing), she replied, her eyes racing about in her head. 'Oh, you speak e-Spanish?'

'Of course I'm an engineer by the day job you know… but I like to keep my linguistic hand in so to speak… Herriot Watt.'

'Herriot… *what*?' she said, her head lurching to one side as though hit by a mallet.

'Herriot WATT,' shouted Benedict, as though by bawling the second word it somehow made it easier to understand… my university… you know...?' he puffed his chest out proprietarily, as though he owned the place. '… I'm thinking of doing a post grad next year… advanced hydraulics.'

'Really… advanced hydraulics!' grimaced Señora Velásquez, '… how fascinating' – though clearly not

fascinating enough, for moments later it was – '…oh, look! … there's José who's about to play his *guitara gitana*…,'(gypsy guitar) she said, '… I really must go… *adios*!'

'I play acoustic guitar!,' he called after her – but by that time she was well out of ear-shot.

By this time I'd been joined by some of the other teachers. 'It's all my fault,' said Paul, Runneymede's Geography teacher, '… I let him have two pints of home brew before we came out on the lawns… it's practically nuclear fission that stuff you know.'

'Well he is an engineer,' I observed.

Mike showed up, having done a quick walk around the lawns like a captain aboard his ship, with Nick in hot pursuit.

'So Bill, you're setting off for Greece after your stint here?' said Mike.

'I am indeed.'

'Do you speak Greek?'

I told him I didn't, but that I'd hired a Greek Linguaphone course from the William Brown Library in Liverpool and was busily trying to learn some.

'Got very far?'

'Not really,' I said honestly.

'I suppose it helps to know some of the language when you're going living out there,' he said, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

'Er, slightly…!' said Nick, nose-diving for a sniff into a half-empty beer glass, and as though passing comment.

The reality was I'd got even less far than I'd let on.

Learning Greek seemed an impossible task. A sealed knot society probably had greater accessibility, and all that my learning of Greek had given me was a sore mouth, trying to imitate the impossible sounds the language made.

'Your mouth alright Bill?' asked Mike, noticing that it was twitching at the recollection.

'Oh, fine,' I said, lying, '…I think somebody's put a squirt of lime in my beer that's all.'

'Probably one of the Sevillians thinking it needed zapping up,' remarked Nick unhelpfully.

At that point Mark sidled up to me looking vexed. Mark was a popular teacher in charge of the football arrangements.

'Bill, can you get that Benedict off my back?' he said, looking around.

'What's he up to now?'

'He's insisting that my football team reform into a choir to sing *Nessun Dorma* for everyone.'

'Er, has he thought about the appropriateness of them singing in Italian when they're supposed to be learning English?' said Nick, showing interest.

'Have they practiced?' I said.

'Not a note, that's the point… he sings it to them, then says they're ready… can you believe that?'

'Don't worry, I think he's forgotten about it now,' I said, pointing to Benedict who was banking on the spot with two drinks stuck in his hands, looking mystified that nobody wanted to speak to him.

Suddenly Maria-Teresa Morrelli bustled forward waving an address book in the air, as though it were a Willie Wonka golden ticket.

'Bill, I want you to write to me when you get to Greece. You really must come to Turin you know...'

I smiled. 'One day perhaps… Greek is so difficult to speak.' I twisted my mouth again.

'Somebody's put lime in his beer,' explained Nick – unhelpful a second time.

'Oh dear,' said Maria-Teresa, '… anyway you will write when you have an address, won't you?'

'I will,' I said, 'when I have an address… I promise.'

Finally Benedict keeled over, and everyone stopped talking and looked around.

He'd gone flat out to do a barnstorming performance, and ended up flat on his back.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 4

Arriving to teach on the Peloponnese

The day of my departure for Greece had arrived and my Mother took time off work to run me to Manchester airport for the early morning flight.

'Can you get Y-fronts in Greece?' she asked, turning to me suddenly.

'I imagine so,' I said.

'You know how to wash undies,' (underpants) 'through, don't you?'

I gave out a weary, '*y-e-s*.'

'Just give them a good rub.'

'*Yes*.'

'Plenty of elbow grease… and don't forget to write will you … just to let us know how you're getting on?'

It was a momentous day. I'd had two weeks to prepare for my year's contract and had spent it wisely.

There was the Linguaphone course, now safely back in the William Brown Library in Liverpool.

'Go on, say something in Greek?' challenged the insolent, chirpy library assistant as I handed my course back.

'Er…' I hesitated.

'You'll do great you will… fat lot of good that course did you!' she settled a sarcastic wince on me. Perhaps I'd said too much to her, perhaps she was jealous? – Liverpool Lou!

I'd also fished around for durable outdoor wear in the high street shops in Liverpool, the ones that were filled with chunky winter coats and woollen mittens – all the stuff I wouldn't need. The fact that I was going to a *hot* country seemed to be lost on me, and perhaps the knowledge that Greece was not greatly removed from Russia on the map (in those days called 'the Soviet Union'), together with having read somewhere that Greek was not dissimilar to Russian, must have had me thinking that I was heading for 'Ice Station Zebra.'

I was pricing sleeping bags in Millets in Liverpool, chatting away blithely, when the shop assistant suddenly looked up –

'Didn't know it snowed in Greece?'

'It doesn't,' I said, not really knowing, '… I don't think so.'

'Well, you won't be needing our Tundra Special, will you then sir?' he said, sniffing his nose at me and pressing the said item back on to the shelves.

These oddities seem inexplicable to me now, though at the time they represented genuine preoccupations. I'd been told by my school that accommodation was provided, so why go to the bother of sleeping bags? I can only think that somehow freedom was associated in my mind with the image of a cowboy, sleeping rough on the prairies.

I said a fond farewell to my Mother and boarded the

Dan-Air flight to Athens. If she was upset she showed no signs.

'Each man has to find his own way in the world,' she would say to me as she slapped two poached eggs on my breakfast plate, well into my twenties. What Mother preached, and what Mother practiced, were not always in harmony. But if there was any sentiment we never showed it, we might be Victorian but we hated novellas, especially Father.

For those who don't remember, Dan-Air was practically a laughing stock in the Eighties. A standard pub joke often worked in the carrier, besides in the common parlance people simply dropped the real name and called it, 'Dan-Dare' airlines.

I didn't know why this was – though I was soon to find out. Perhaps the pilots were specially trained in erratic landings, or head-hunted from the most far-flung pool of crop-sprayers available? But certainly Dan-Air gave you a bumpy ride. If there was no air turbulence, Dan-Air would find it.

Consequently my flight over to Athens was as jerky as people had joked it would be, we rolled and pitched like a funfair flight notching up the anti.

Fortunately I am a very good flyer so wasn't particularly shaken until the tail end of the journey, when the jet just dumped itself on Athens airport. I know this since I had a window seat and without warning the Parthenon loomed into view, like a tiny miniature inside a glass bauble, the snow-filled type, except that there wasn't any snow (lucky I hadn't bought the Tundra Special!), but plenty of shaking from an

unseen hand, not of the glass bauble of course, but of the aeroplane.

I was never so relieved to get out of a plane. I made a note not to fly Dan-Air again, and never did.

The owner of my school, a lady by the name of Elena, would not be there to greet me she'd told me in advance. Instead I was met by Carol, the ultra-efficient agent for Teachers For Greece who supplied all these unsuspecting Greek school owners with their equally unsuspecting employees.

There was a little time to get to know Athens, to meet other teachers, and get psyched up for classes. Athens was blisteringly hot that summer and by late August, when I arrived, the heat seemed to be at boiling point. We were all put up for a few days in a dingy city centre hotel, with a receptionist who seemed to sneer, as if to say – 'look what you've got yourself into!'

Yet Athens was a joy to discover, with its endless serendipitous lanes that landed you back to where you wanted to be without really knowing how. (Perhaps I was just lucky!) Its squares, or *plateia*, were crammed with impossibly exotic Greek girls and their seemingly sex-starved suitors.

Bob, a tall blonde graduate, and his young wife were headed for Larnia, a place which made me envious that I wasn't going to as well, simply because it sounded so mythical and romantic.

Yanni Koskinos, a taxi driver from Tripoli, was a friend of my school's owner and had drawn the short straw to pick me up.

'Where you coming from?' asked Yanni, as we sped

along in his yellow taxi. 'You like Greek girls?' – I didn't know any. 'You speak Greek?' he said with a gale of laughter, anticipating the negative, which he got. 'You been to Greece before?' – it was like being pummelled by a lie detector.

In fact I had been to Greece before. Corfu had been on my itinerary back in 1981 and at least partly explained my mild feeling of being miffed at not landing a job on an island in my contract.

'What you been doin' in England?' – he carried on.

Perhaps, I wondered, I was being questioned for an FBI-style file he would immediately write up when he got to Tripoli.

'*This strange English guy… I definitely saw a ball of thick tweed socks pop out from his suitcase*,' he might say.

In fact my Harris tweed jacket – since lost – was packed in, partly to fill out my own image of the Englishman abroad as much as anything.

We rolled into Tripoli just as the light was fading. I took a frappé with my new school owner and her charming engineer husband, Georgio (pronounced, *Yor-a-gus*.) They were both ecstatically happy, Elena having recently given birth to their first child.

'Oh, you know frappé?' asked Elena.

'Is he a Greek comedian?.. Politician?.. writer?.. I've no idea?' I said honestly – in short order I'd managed to make a complete idiot of myself.

'Ah, no!.. no!.. no!..' said Elena, laughing wildly. 'Frappé… it's a Greek drink!' she said, with a blood-curdling roar – '…agghhhhhhhhh!'

'What the hell have we got here?' was what she was

probably thinking. Still, if that was the case, my own misgivings were not far behind.

Accommodation was set up. I was to be in a flat which lent a new meaning to the word, since in reality it was a room twinned with another, both rooms sharing a kitchen, and below pavement level, so that pedestrians feet could be peered at passing by – more like a dungeon some might say.

Andy, the teacher with whom I was to share, had yet to arrive.

'Good God!.. what's this!' he said when he finally took a first eyeful. 'There's hardly any light!'

'Don't worry… I'll take the further room if you like?' I said. The further room was even further removed from the sliver of oblong glass giving light from the street, which it only received by deflection, with the result that I'd effectively volunteered myself into the penumbra. Still, there was plenty of big blue light outside to enjoy – at least that's how I looked at it.

But my first night in Tripoli hadn't been in this medieval dungeon, that was spent in the Monrovia Hotel, a plush 4-star affair, like a battleship somewhere off the town's main square. It was here that I was awoken during the night with an electric buzzing coming from somewhere inside my blankets. I shot out of bed to examine the intrusion. I discovered I was sharing my bed with a beetle the size of a walnut! It rotated mockingly as I picked it up on a piece of paper and flung it, horror-stricken, out of the window.

Dimitria, the hotel owner's daughter and subsequently a student of mine, mischievously laughed

when I mentioned about the beetle – I bet it was a plant.

My students were a mixed lot as far as ability went, but with a few exceptions, and if they had one thing that united them it was a strong desire to be elsewhere. Discipline early on was a circus act to be got through with as much agility as you could muster. In the end I threw the books away as much as possible and simply relied on captivating my audience. Yet 'the Navarino School of English' in Tripoli, where I worked, had one great thing going for it – you didn't need to work at the weekends. This left me free to explore the Peloponnese, something I'd been keen to do before I came because of its mythological connections.

Duly I set about ticking off the places of great historic interest I wanted to visit, and it was not long before this was set off against a parallel ticking off of the days I had to complete before I could see the end of my contract. (Perhaps I should have taken Maria-Teresa's advice and gone to Turin?)

Yet slowly Greece opened its gifts to me. Its people were almost universally sociable and interested in you. They had a harsh side, but this I put down to their long suffering under the Ottoman Empire, and it came as some surprise for me to learn how highly the name of Lord Byron was revered in Greece since in many ways he is seen as the father of their independence.

I had of course brought my own literary ambitions to Greece. One of the things I wanted to do while there was write, even if I had no idea at first what about.

I soon passed my free days discovering the sites of

ancient Greece around the Peloponnese, and in doing so, not a little of myself. On one occasion Zoe, the Greek English teacher at the school, accompanied me.

'You're so English!' she would castigate – as though I could do anything about it. I even got invited for the odd meal with her mother and father, which I really appreciated.

'*Kale-spera-sas*!,' (Good day), I would sheepishly say in greeting as I entered the Kouvelas' home in the centre of the town. Zoe's mother would laugh hysterically, banging a hand to her knee, or the table, doubling up, begging me to stop before she did herself a mischief, or before I said anything else explosively funny in my sacrilegiously bad, fledgling Greek. It made me feel like an exhibit from the zoo.

'Of course there could never be anything between you and me,' Zoe explained to me one day, '… you see the problem is my father… you'd have to be Greek … and you're not Greek. He doesn't like foreigners.'

Mr. Kouvelas smiled a cruel smile into my eyes. The liquid sacks beneath his eyes belying a burdensome career in the Greek police force.

Once a week I taught in an outlying village where the Navarino School had a branch. This was Livithi, where students sat attentively in front of me on wooden benches made by Elena's father. Why couldn't the students in Tripoli be as well behaved as these students were I often asked myself?

After class I took to waiting in Mr. Costoulas' barber's shop across the road from the school, the latter being really only an empty shell, containing a

blackboard, some benches and little else, a place nobody could think of any other use for perhaps?

Mr. Costoulas had big sympathetic eyes that spoke of an artesian well of goodness, and always had a sunny smile to set you at ease. Increasingly as my contract wore on I was able to exchange a few words with Mr. Costoulas, since at Christmas on returning home – as it happened incurring a twenty-four hour return journey back to Greece because the somewhat suspect travel agent in Tripoli had said it was my only option, making me pass through Stuttgart and Budapest, and knocking me out for a whole day when I got back – I'd invested in a spanking new Greek Linguaphone course, and was eager to try out my progress.

'*Heeonee*,' (snow) we'd agreed on the pronunciation one day, and indeed it had. It was the worst snowfall in the village in decades and I got stuck there, having to stay the night in Livithi's only hotel – and that was April! (Perhaps my trip to Millets had made the gods angry and they'd decided to teach me a lesson?)

When not gesticulating with Mr. Costoulas I would stand at the bus stop, waiting for the bus which came from Olympia (or *Olympus* as it's called in Greek) to get me back to Tripoli before night-fall. I was anxious to catch that bus since it was the last one of the day, and if I didn't get that I was stuck in Livithi, with Tripoli a good hour's bus ride away. So I would wait and take in the impressive landscape around me – where little moved other than goatherds – waiting for the bus from Olympia to take me to the rest of my life.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 5

Finding my way around Greek life

Saturday mornings I got to look forward to in Tripoli. On the busy Kalamata Road, where I shared the subterranean flat with Andy, noises of metal poles being erected, crates of fruit stacked and unstacked, awakened my hard-earned slumbers.

More often than not however only the earliest birds of the fruit market on the Kalamata Road where about when I set out to discover the Peloponnese.

In retrospect I should have gone further and struck out for Thessaloniki, or all the sites of ancient Attica, making all of Greece my playground. Instead I limited myself to what was of interest on the Peloponnese, taking the lazer-like blue waters of the Corinth Canal as my boundary.

The buses were always impossibly early for these expeditions. I remember querying the 6 am start, asking if there were any later buses, only to be greeted by a backward flick of the head, a sort of neighing action, the Greek way of saying – 'no.' It was a blessing in disguise since that way you had the best part of the day when you arrived to explore.

Sparta was an early destination on my itinerary, and provided an exception to the many places I later visited alone, since Zoe, in a gesture of Greek goodwill, had decided to give me a guided commentary.

'It's so lovely, isn't it?' said Zoe as we sat surveying the bougainvillea-filled landscape from a hillside restaurant. 'You know, civilisations have tried to dominate Greece for centuries but they always failed.'

Zoe had a habit – difficult to convey in writing – of a downward dip on the last word of every sentence. It was the only aspect of her spoken English which prevented her from being otherwise a perfect speaker.

'First there were the Persians then there were the Turks…'

'What about the Moguls…?' I asked.

'Oh, they came too… at some time or other…we're really a *mixture*, she said, exaggerating the key word, '…of many different races.'

I was busily enjoying my Greek salad, which I was beginning now to ask for in the Greek as '*Horiatiki*', and keeping half an ear open to all Zoe was saying.

'But having said that..,' Zoe went on, '…the Greek face is very distinct.'

'Mmm… I agree,' I said.

'You can't mistake it.'

'And the big aquiline nose?' I added.

'It's a little flatter actually… if you look at the faces on the Parthenon… you'll see what I mean.' I continued munching away at my salad.

'Well anyway,' she said, turning to the landscape once more, '… then we were attacked by the Venetians at one point.'

'The Vikings too I imagine?' I said hopefully.

She grimaced. 'No I don't think they ever got this far… the Visigoths maybe… but of course the Turks were here longest with their blasted *Ottoman* Empire,' – she exploded with the adjective '… they did the most destruction...' She stopped abruptly. '… you're not listening, are you?'

I looked up from my Greek salad disorientated. 'Sorry… you were saying?'

'You're not listening to what I'm saying!'

'Oh, I do apologize Zoe…it's just these peppers… they make your thoughts wander off… well they do mine.'

'Really?' she said ruminatively, and turned to the landscape once more.

'And this Greek alcohol of course… phew!.. what's it called?'

'Wine.'

'Oh, I see… thanks.'

Zoe continued with her little history lesson. 'Coming much more up to date we were invaded by the Italians… in the war.'

'Oh dear.' I sympathised.

'We beat them… but then they sent the Germans and we…,' she looked as if she didn't want to say 'lost', but couldn't quite manage it, '…anyway,' she said, 'that's why we have '*Okhi'* Day, you see?'

'I see.' I said.

'*Okhi*' Day was when the Greek nation said, 'no' to the troops sent by Hitler – a grand national symbol of defiance, now enshrined in a public holiday.

'Sparta really is quite something,' I said, wiping the oil away from my chin with a napkin.

'Oh, this isn't Sparta,' said Zoe, shooting her thin arm out to point to somewhere south. 'That's Sparta.'

It was the uninspiring modern town we'd passed through to get to the mountains.

'So this is?…' I asked.

'Mystras… ' she said, '… don't confuse the two.'

'I won't,' I said, and insisted on paying for the meal.

After the meal we strolled around a Babylonian garden of old Byzantine castles and monasteries, where creeping foliage and vegetation that only the most ardent botanist could identify billowed voluptuously out from the walls. Here and there a lizard flashed out over the stones and bricks, and was gone. The mid-September sun beat down, donning the whole scene – including the humans in it – within a canopy of heat wherein drowsiness ruled.

'Phew!.. hot!' I said. Zoe agreed. We sought the shade of the interior of buildings, which soon revealed bright ceramic tiles and statuary inside.

'These are Orthodox icons,' explained Zoe. 'In those days Constantinople was the centre of the Byzantine Empire.'

'I know,' I said, desperate to show some knowledge.

'Only it wasn't called Constantinople…it was called Byzantium… now it's Istanbul.'

'I know that too,' I said frustratedly, feeling like a

competitor on *Blockbusters* to whom Bob Holness refuses to ask any questions.

'Well, as you can see, there's quite a lot of history here, and not many people know it exists.'

We made a last enchanted loop of the Byzantine ruins once the sun had eased off a bit, and wended our way back down the slopes to Sparta, the bus station, and Tripoli.

'I no has to speak English!' shouted Manos defiantly to my face. Manos was a difficult student, one whose idea of acquiring English was looking up saucy words in the English dictionary and sniggering. He was fifteen and desperate to get into the Greek army, which was compulsory, a destiny which – on the basis of his class behaviour – he was not alone in wishing would be tomorrow. Elena had already slapped him round the face a time or two, but he soon reverted to type.

Not all the children were such slippery customers. Phillip, a tall boy, often quizzed me on my knowledge of physics, which was sparse to say the least, suddenly letting loose on grand, involved formulas, apparently planted in his head by a previous teacher who, before turning to TEFL, had taught physics. I felt sorry not being equal to Phillip's passion for his chosen subject, eventually feigning some interest, even desperately looking up basic rules of physics in books, just to have a handle to talk about if I happened to bump into him around the town, as I often did, as with other students.

'Ah, your Newton… he was such a genius… to see that apple… it came a-falling down from the a-sky…

and he says… ah!… there's…a-my a-theory!… I've been a-looking for… just a-hanging in the air! Excuse a-me… I've just a-got to write it down...' Then he would smile.

To do justice to Phillip's English, he was probably much better than that, but when he got in a passion about physics it went all over the place.

Nikos and Georgio were a comedy duo who were Greece's answer to Laurel and Hardy in that their comedy was almost exclusively non-verbal. One of the classrooms had a curtain acting as a divider between the other classroom – a silly idea really since it did nothing to reduce noise – from which the dynamic duo would typically emerge performing an impromptu street argument in Greek. Of course I didn't understand a word of it – all it meant was that the class started a bit late.

Dimitria and Thalassa were two girls who would often give me things, often crafted by themselves, like early exploits into macramé.

Lydia was a girl born like a Siamese twin, only tied to a mouth that never stopped talking, rather than another twin sister.

'What?..' she would ask, oggly-eyed to every question I asked her, never listening to a single word. One day I threatened to tell Elena about her constant talking and she made stay-of-execution eyes at me for days afterwards.

During my first few weeks in Tripoli there was an earthquake in Kalamata, almost fifty miles south in the Mani area of the Peloponnese. I thought it strange that ambulances blurred through the night down the

Kalamata Road, waking me up. I learned the next day that people had been rushed to hospital in Tripoli. About fifty people died. I hadn't felt anything because I'd been on a bus travelling from Nafplion at the time and, by some law of physics that no doubt Phillip would appreciate, you never feel an earthquake when inside a moving object.

Nafplion soon became the place I'd head for again and again during my time in Greece. It was a fortified coastal town, with an ancient castle creeping up to the high acropolis overlooking the town, from where the views were magnificent.

It was in Nafplion that I set about writing up my masterpiece, the one that would make me rich and famous when I returned from Greece, a verse play in Middle English called, *Olban.*

It was in Nafplion that I also bumped into Archie and Henry, a strange duo like an Edwardian music hall act (especially 'Archie', whose real name he told me was 'Christopher'.) They were dragging out the summer in Greece before returning to Cambridge University. Their speech was smattered with private banter like – 'as if!..' and, 'jolly bad egg,' as though trying to live up to some image they'd created for themselves.

In the end I spent a whole day with Archie and Henry. We swam among jellyfish, and they couldn't believe that I'd avoided being stung, having swum through a thick slew of them, which, looking back, neither can I. (Though perhaps I *was* since I remember feeling sharp electrical charges!) I remember thinking it was a pity I couldn't fit them into my verse play, *Olban.*

'Olban' was an alter-ego figure of my own invention – I see it now though I didn't at the time – who comes to the rescue of Old England (yes, even before it was 'Merrie') to vanquish the invading Norman hoards of 1066. I think a character like this really did exist, since I'd researched the history, only mine was an updated version, who spoke Shakespearian English he wouldn't have spoken (my play was set in 1073), and enjoyed a camaraderie among his followers like Robin Hood, whom he couldn't possibly have known.

Still, if my play was a bit of a monster, it was my monster and I was keeping it close – a bit like the jellyfish!

To give you an idea, this is how it opened –

OLBAN

(Echoes of an ancient idiom.)

Act 1, Scene 1 *(A saxon encampment somewhere in the fenlands of England. A meeting has been called and Earl Wulfsweyn, being chief, addresses it.)*

Earl Wulfsweyn – For seven years now hath the fish-scaled scourge made domicile of this Isle's land,

The scythe and the saw art bondage in our own hand.

Nor are our wanderings free,

As from bower to river we must catch some coated invisibility.

And so it went on. But if Olban's wanderings weren't

free at least mine were. Consequently whenever I went to visit the ancient wonders of the places I did, such as Sparta, Mycenae, Epidavros and Nafplion, I'm sure it was with half an eye to how it might improve my verse play.

I was not to know it at the time, but *Olban* was to take up the next two years of my life, on and off. I tweaked and modified it at whim, feeling at one time that perhaps Olban never gets out of the Fens and simply shouts, 'help!' at the end, like a desperate figure lost in Hampton Court maze. But *Olban* was eventually finished, two years later in England.

The title of my play I particularly agonized over, feeling that with a title like *Olban* it might not enjoy popular appeal (I hadn't given a second thought to the Middle English!), I duly tinkered with it, leaving the title as it was when I came up with, *'All-bran.'*

Nafplion was the perfect retreat for a budding writer. The Hotel Elena, which I made my writer's eerie, had bright fresh-smelling rooms some of which, if I was lucky, had views giving to the hill-top castle.

One night – for some reason I always wrote at night – I was disturbed by a party in the next room. I can't write like this I thought, and went to complain.

'It's too noisy,' I protested.

'I'll stop it… don't worry!' said the helpful young male receptionist politely.

I crept back up to my endeavours, but still the thumping and shouting continued. I descended a second time.

A ruddy-faced and highly-strung receptionist as he'd

by now become began fluttering his arms about like two air-born ears of corn. 'I cannot keep them more silents!' he said, banging the desk very hard with his fists, '… I cannot please all the peoples all the time!' he exploded.

I returned to my room chastened but in somewhat philosophical frame of mind. Perhaps we should try to see other people's point of view from time to time, even if they do sound like Abraham Lincoln.

In March a very strange incident occurred in Tripoli. People were piling into supermarkets and denuding the shelves of all stock, fully-laden cars parked outside, crammed to the roof with provisions, and cars and taxis were making their way clumsily out of the town.

'What's going on?' I asked one of my students later in the day.

'Oh it's the blasted Turkies,' (she meant 'Turks') '… they're going to invade Lesbos… and my brother's there… in the army… he might get killed!' she said through tears, the other girls quickly comforted her.

It was indeed something of an international crisis and it seemed, not for the first time, that war between Greece and Turkey was imminent. (There had been a war fought over Cyprus in 1974.)

I took to the hills. I always seek solace when pandemonium beckons. I was abstractly sketching when I heard a heart-rending noise, but one I couldn't easily identify, a heavy, metallic '*thud!... thud!*…'*thud!*' of a noise.

I poised my pencil – that was it!

Surely there was no other possible explanation – we

were being bombed! The noise continued and I could see the Turkish aeroplanes dropping their bombs in my mind, obviously somewhere nearby, yet still out of sight. I waited, gripped with horror, for the first sighting of an enemy plane.

But there were no bombs, and no aeroplanes. It had all simply been the noise from a nearby quarry just outside Tripoli which, until then, I hadn't even known had existed. My relief was almost palpable – no war today then.

Yet the war atmosphere was unsettling to say the least. I rang my mother to tell her.

'Oh, dear me!.. well, I suppose you'll just have to find your way to the British Embassy in Athens… if sparks start flying,' she said.

Thanks Mother! Not the reassurance I was looking for, the image of an exodus of TEFL teachers fleeing the pursuing Turkish bullets springing to mind – being strafed like sitting ducks on rural waysides. 'Find your way,' suggested confusion, and I had enough of that on my plate with *Olban.*

The crisis over Lesbos was eventually resolved by American mediation, the war clouds hoved on over Tripoli, and once more the smile returned to Vasiliki's face, her brother would be safe, for the time being at least.

By the time spring arrived I had struck off many of the ancient sites I wanted to see. There only remained one – Olympia.

Olympia I wanted to visit because as the birthplace of the Olympic Games, and as someone seeing himself

as sporty (I ran cross-country a lot in those days), the attraction was obvious. I just had to take the bus ride I took every Wednesday to Livithi one Saturday, only pressing on to Olympia. This I did towards the end of May.

I was not disappointed. After a Bailey bridge where we were dropped off by the bus, I walked back to the shattered remains of Olympia.

Great Doric columns stood sagging to one side, or more erect, depending on how the centuries had treated them. I tried to envisage figures racing in billowing gowns and creeping leather footwear, and found I could. I found a spot inside a temple, thick with overgrowth, and squatted down to better peer at the Doric columns, and the story they had to tell, glowing pearly white against the azure skies. (I've since thought how foolish that was due to snakes!)

The next month was June, and my contract at the Navarino School was about to end. Greece had given lots of pointers to what I wanted to do, but it hadn't presented me in my hands a future which I knew I wanted to have. Perhaps, like the gods lurking unseen in the skies over Greece might know, the future was something I had to grab for myself.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 6

Return to Runneymede School, and job offer in Turin

Back once more at the Runneymede Summer School and nothing much had changed. Cilla was still there of course, complaining that George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley should never have split up from 'Wham' as she missed their concerts that, she said, made her feel young again (she was forty-eight), and which gave her ample opportunity to show off her wardrobe of wide-shouldered jackets. I was relieved to see that Maria-Teresa Morrelli had returned, and was still harrying me about having to go to Turin.

'You must meet Georgio Bill… he has a wonderful consultancy in Turin. Perhaps you could be his assistant?' she said, smiling expectantly. 'You know… re-train?'

'Me, a medical assistant? I had a very fluid view of careers, but re-training for Medicine, and in a foreign country, that was a bit far-fetched, even for me.

Claudia, Maria-Teresa's beautiful blonde daughter was also with her again this year. She was the one who'd been stuck down the mine shaft in Betsy-Coed

last summer for nearly a whole minute (looking back it was probably the management giving them what their version of a thrill was.)

'Su!.. Su!' (up!.. up!) and, *'dai!.. dai!,'* (give!.. give!.. – in this case, 'give us freedom'), shouted the Italians from below.

'We'll have you out in a jiffy,' chimed the merry Welshman who oversaw the Heath Robinson-looking affair that winched them down. 'Now don't panic… just sit tight!' – I like that, they were stood up!

'Dai!.. dai!,' they continued in harmony.

'I've already told you, you're not going to die,' said the placid Welshman. 'Now just calm down!'

What he couldn't have known was that *'dai'* is from *'dare'* in Italian for 'give', or in this case – 'give me a hand out of this hellhole!'

A huffing and puffing Claudia Morrelli emerged all pasty-faced only to have her mother's arms wrapped around her neck like a deep-water squid.

'Poverino!' (poor thing), whelped Maria-Teresa, before going off to the rest of the group, who were oscillating on the spot with outrage, threatening to sue – and what was worse – never come again!

Yet in five minutes they were all smiling and slapping the amazed shaft operator on the back, even inviting him to their homes in Italy.

'Thank you! Oh, thank you! and come and see me in Italy… here's my address.'

From one point of view this ostentatious display of hospitality was understandable – after all, he had saved their lives.

Mike, however, was not there again that year. Perhaps he'd had enough of stalking the corridors during classes looking for educationally sub-normal escapees from class, or turning out the entire staff of Broadbents department store on Lord street because Concepcion from Seville had lost her mother's priceless gold necklace which she'd lent her to go to England with – a family heirloom, the one that had been with the Conquistadors in Peru (more likely had came back from), and was dated '1567'. In the end Concepcion had left it in a box of Kleenex back at her family's home, so it was a big fuss over nothing, although Mike had had to grovel on all fours at Broadbents – on the other hand perhaps he was just fed up with shouting, 'QUIET!'

In his stead had stepped Don. 'Don', never 'Donald' – presumably because that would make him sound too much like the Disney character we teachers agreed – was not popular from the word go.

Don was a small balding man of around forty-five whose complexion was roasted honey-brown by the strong Bahrainian sun where he'd just been teaching. How he got the job at Runneymede I shall never know, a mud man of the Solomon Isles could probably have done a better job. He'd made a huge mistake early on by frog-marching (literally) the students on to the rear garden for what he called a, 'roll call', abandoning Mike's gym. This was, he said, because the fresh salt sea air would have an invigorating effect on the students, better preparing them for classes. Yes, but then perhaps so did the stair-rods of rain which started to pelt down drenching everybody. Little Guiseppe from Turin was

soon bleating, *'dai!... dai!'* (in this context – 'give me shelter from this horrible English rain!'), but Don was having none of it.

'Put hairs on your chest this will,' he said, sticking his out – as though the students wanted that, especially the females, who didn't. 'Now listen to me… you are not going anywhere,' he declared like a Sergeant-Major amidst the hiss of the rain. 'Stand in line… stand in line… and everybody shut up while I take the roll-call.'

He would have been far more at home on the parade ground at Aldershot, from where I couldn't help allowing myself to believe he'd come.

'Stay there you! … get back in line!' he lashed out, eventually brutishly man-handling a girl to the ground, who immediately burst into tears. From that point on Don deservedly earned his nickname amongst the students – 'Hitler.'

Despite a demented Director of Studies, redolent of the Gestapo itself, installing himself at the helm of Runneymede Summer School, the season soon got into full swing.

One day I was accompanying Cilla down the corridor upstairs after class – where she'd clearly been on the lookout for escapee students – when she began to moan about some naughty Italian boy who'd invaded the lawns outside, saying something about Mussolini and the invasion of Africa.

I stared at her aghast – it was bad enough having a Hitler stomping around Runneymede without the full European Axis complement.

'Cilla… you can't say that!..' I said through a slit

mouth, '…just because a few over-excited Italian students play truant, you can't go on about Mussolini and the invasion of Ethiopia.'

'Are you sure that's not Abyssinia?' she bridled, '… and not Ethiopia… clever cloggs!'

Coming up the grand staircase I noticed one of the Italian leaders, Signora Vercillo, and pondered the potential for embarrassment with Cilla at my side. She was almost alongside us, coming up the staircase as we were going down, and was beginning to make demur eyes, primed, I could tell, for a *'buongiorno!'* (good day), since for some reason, unlike the other Italian leaders, Signora Vercillo didn't take advantage of the opportunity for improving her English whilst in England.

Sure enough – '*Buongiorno!'*, she said, gliding past and clocking Cilla's hefty shoulder pads.

'She likes my shoulder pads!' preened Cilla. 'Women know these things… clearly I'm setting a trend.'

We got to the entrance hall where a welcome blast of salt-sea air billowed in from outside.

'Ah, that's bracing!' I said, pleased to be finished at last for the day.

'Work's nice when it's over,' declared Cilla, as though reading my thoughts.

I could count myself lucky, at least Cilla hadn't dropped any cultural bricks of the Mussolini-type in my presence.

Anselmo, a priest leading the group from La Corunna, suddenly appeared, ambling up the driveway, his black cape flowing liberally behind him.

'Who's this?' said Cilla, craning her neck, 'Cardinal Richelieu?'

'*Cilla*!' I said, horrified, 'you can't say that!.. he might hear you.'

'Well, I'm not bothered…' she said, tossing her head, 'we're all in the European Union now.'

Anselmo, the priest, drew level and gave a modest but painful smile.

'Good morning Sexton Blake,' barked Cilla.

Benedict was another teacher not back at summer school. He'd been due to start but at the last minute took up a secondment to a hydraulics firm in Stockholm – England's loss of a singer was Sweden's gain of an engineer.

Joe was a fun-loving, off-beat Roman Catholic priest new to the intake. Joe was normally a year-round teacher of English at the British School in Rome where he'd been for some years. However, he was a fully-fledged priest and often amused us with his tales of life amidst the brotherhood. He said he was working the summer to make some money, which sounded odd for a priest, but then Joe was no ordinary priest. He needed the money, it became obvious, to finance his predilection for cigarettes (he was practically a chain-smoker), sweets and other 'creature comforts' as he called them. Joe was like a typical boy of eleven or twelve blown up to twenty-seven. At Runneymede he kept a low profile among we teachers, occasionally producing comments – the ladies presence *not* excepted, like –

'Isn't it funny how when it's really freezing and you

have a pee your willie shrinks to about *that* size!' he said, circling with his fingers the approximate size of a pea.

Joe would roll up to the staff room with a wicked smile on his face, poised to ask you if you'd heard the one about the, '… nubile nun and the travelling salesman,' which, needless to say, you hadn't, then he'd promptly fill in your knowledge deficit. The closer to the wind that Mark sailed with his jokes, the funnier they were, and his enjoyment of them was infectious. Once he boasted that he got his mother to iron his shirts for him by threatening to give her fifty Hail Marys, a threat, he said, which never failed to produce results.

Joe was not exactly a hunk of masculinity, and yet you certainly got the impression that he was trying to emulate the guy from a TV launderette ad of the time (the one where a muscly youth takes off his Levis jeans in front of admiring girls), since why else had he announced that he'd bought himself some Levis and was taking up muscle-building? – a more unpriestly priest it was difficult to imagine.

One particular wet day in the staff room he told us the story of his first day at seminary school. He told us how he'd observed that a standard line of the senior priests was –

'Now tell me son, are you quite settled? Is everything alright? Do you feel fine?' or words to that effect. And Joe, being Joe, had regaled his fellow trainee priests by coming up with his own standard line in response which, needless to say, was never used – 'Ah, yes Father, thank you… why I'm as happy as a pig in shit!'

'Anyway, one day…,' said Joe, between long drags on his cigarette, '… we had a top cardinal visiting… I mean *numero uno*… apart from God himself of course… only it was completely hush-hush, so we didn't know he was a cardinal … what made matters worse was that he was youthful-looking, and that threw us too!'

'You mean like Richard Chamberlain?..' interrupted Colette, who added that she was reading *The Thorn Birds*, a book about a priest who has an affair, and one that had caused something of a sensation around that time.

'I just love stories about dishy priests I do,' she said, closing her eyes and drawing her knees up tight, presumably imagining Richard Chamberlain with his arms wrapped around her. 'I think *The Thorn Birds* is one of the greatest love stories ever written...'

'Well… yes..,' said Joe, fixing Colette with a strange stare, as though wondering whether he himself might be being sized up by her. He gave the collar of his Fred Perry T-shirt an awkward tug. '… so, anyway, there I am… coming out from mass one day when … *crash*… I bump straight into this new kid on the block… well that's what I think he is…' Colette by this time has lost interest and is examining her eye-liner in a pocket mirror.

'Now tell me son… are you settled?.. is everything alright? he asks,' says Joe. 'I give him a half smile… oh yes, fine, thank you Father… why I'm as happy as a pig in shit!'

'I'm very pleased to hear that,' say the not-amused figure, '… my name's Father O'Donnell, the new

cardinal…' he gasps, 'I tell you, I could have fallen through the floor,' said Joe, dissolving into laughter, as we all soon were.

Colette snapped her mirror shut and peered down to Joe's brand-new Nike trainers. 'I didn't know priests were allowed to wear trainers?'

Two years later when I worked a final summer at Runneymede a rumour was rife that Joe had been defrocked and was no longer a priest. Was it true I wondered? It was certainly shocking news, but knowing Joe, not entirely surprising. I couldn't eradicate an image of him playing the slot machines at Blackpool – as I could well imagine him doing – and giving his memorable rejoinder to anyone who might be foolish enough to ask him how he was – 'Ah, I'm as happy as a pig in shit!'

One mature student I met that summer was Giovanni, an Italian. Giovanni was later to become a real friend when I went to work in Turin that September. He worked for FIAT (still does in fact) in Turin, and was over with a small group of mature students, all professional people hoping to improve their English, mainly for work.

Gianni and his sister Grazia were a couple of architects (I think they had set up business together) and like Giovanni were from the same hill-top town of Mondovi in Piedmont, a town I was to get to know incredibly well as my friendship with Giovanni blossomed when I went to teach in Italy. Gianni was surprisingly absent-minded for an architect and was having something of a standing row with his landlady in Southport because she refused to give him a house

key. *'Meu chave?'* (My key?) became a standard of any (limited) conversation between Gianni and his landlady – his whole stay in Southport must have been fixated around that non-existent key.

One day, on an outing to the Albert Dock in Liverpool, we passed an enormous anchor being used as a feature for this – then new – tourist attraction.

'Look Gianni!' I shouted 'Your key!'

I learned to roller-skate that summer with the group from La Corunna under Anselmo, which was comprised of many accomplished skaters around the sixteen, seventeen age mark. And so at twenty-seven I finally got to grips with a sport which I never could, a sport which is like trying to stay upright while rolling on golf balls at high speed. Actually, it was *'roller-blading,'* since the 'wheels' were more like discs, but the skills required are much the same.

'Don't look at your feet!' advised Marta, 'that way you'll downfall.'

'You mean fall down…,' I said, promptly crashing into the laddered wall of the Southport YMCA, where I and a group of teachers had taken the students to skate.

'Ouch!' I screamed, as my arse discovered the density of the parke floor.

'I told you so,' said Marta, a bright student who would be starting university when she got back to Spain, '… you're not doing it like I said.'

I picked myself up and we carried on. Whether the Latin temperament or not, it was lovely to see the kids

holding hands as they scythed around the gym. Teachers were not excluded from this, and soon we all must have looked like a moving version of *'Auld Lang Syne.'* I changed partners and out would come another accommodating hand in what for me was almost like an electrically-charged clasp – somehow in Greece it was as if I'd lost my sense of touch, and it suddenly came flooding back to me.

Adam and Kathleen became a conspicuous pair at Runneymede that summer. They'd started the course badly by chaffing at each other and had ended it by falling madly in love. The last I heard of them that summer was that they'd gone on a romantic holiday to Mykonos.

Adam, like Benedict, was another scientist, something he freely announced himself as in the staff room, but unlike Benedict, who was all head-in-the-clouds, Adam had some sense of the survival of the species – as his subsequent wooing of Kathleen was to prove.

'Teachers are a twisted bunch of losers and no-hopers… why else would they be teachers?' This must have been Adam's opening gambit to ingratiate himself in the staff room. 'I mean at least we scientists try to change the world,' he went on. 'When I'm thirty I shall be inventing something revolutionary in physics… not listening to *La Bamba…'* (it was all the rage that summer), '… outside in the garden… being asked if I'd care for a chipolata on a stick!' he said with a sneer – so he'd bumped into Cilla in his travels I thought.

Cilla as usual had been busy organising the

welcoming *al fresco* buffet for teachers on the lawns outside where the chipolatas ruled. I could well imagine Cilla getting up Adam's nose – it was just a pity that a chipolata stick didn't. Even the outings to places like York and Chester wouldn't put a smile on Adam's face.

Kathleen, it could be said, arrived at Runneymede School as a quaint, quiet parlour-maid type from *Wuthering Heights* and ended up the main protagonist, along with Heathcliffe (aka, Adam), on the windy moors in her own play.

They were noticed first chatting with the students by the monument, then taking afternoon tea in Mellors on Lord Street and then, sneaking up the back way into the school from Rotten Row.

Unwittingly I think it was I who played a part in bringing Adam and Kathleen together. I was chewing the cud in the staff room about how it was a pity that Shakespeare couldn't be taught to students because they'd just gawp at you like Alsatians watching television if you tried.

'But *have* you ever tried?' pipes up Adam, peering down his nose at me – he was like that to everyone, except Kathleen, and even to her at first.

'Well… no… with the one exception of Jacques' speech from *As You Like It*,' I said.

'And how did that go?' asks Adam.

'You mean, *The Seven Ages Of Man?*.. it didn't… they were completely lost by terms like, 'mewling schoolboy' and 'wise saws',' I said.

'Hmm, figures,' interjected Barry, a shy teacher, normally at Accountancy college in Liverpool.

'How can a saw be wise?' pipes up Colette, 'my Dad's got a garage full of them but they never say anything.'

'Precisely, it's a verb,' said Adam, his eyes sparkling, obviously eager to show he was most adept with the OED, as well as being Einstein's brother. 'It is not a concrete noun, but as an abstract one that Shakespeare is using it here...'

'Now you've got me confused,' protested Colette, pursing her lips.

'*Saws*… he means sayings,' said Adam cockily.

'Well why doesn't he say so, the divvy…,' chides Colette, and suddenly, plucking *The Thorn Birds* out of her handbag, which she says she wants to offer to Joe to read since it was he who first brought up the subject of sex and the priesthood, makes to leave – only by now Joe's taken to avoiding the staff room when Colette's around.

'Quite!' agrees Barry, looking ahead in a fixed stare, as though working out a difficult part of Compound Interest.

'Ah, well then he wouldn't be Shakespeare, would he?' declares Adam, '… what do you think Kathleen?' he says, turning to her – she makes no reply, apart from fluttering her eyelids.

Colette storms out. Unbeknown to the management she'd been teaching the students 'Scouse' (Liverpudlian dialect), even addressing her students collectively as, 'Yous.'

That afternoon you could have heard a pin drop in the staff room as a huge bang on the side wall announced

a rude entrance (or exit) coming from the classroom next door. Immediately, I could pick out Adam's booming ego-centric voice and Kathleen's contrasting whispery one.

'Have not saints lips and holy palmers too? *[Romeo] (or Adam.)*

'Ay pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer *[Juliet] (or Kathleen.)*

They'd got hold of two student editions of *Romeo And Juliet* and were doing an impromptu performance of it inside another teacher's classroom.

I should have known. Again it was my fault. I'd happened to mention to Helen – a lovely girl going up to Oxford next term for teacher training – that I thought the word 'windswept' was underused.

'That's a great word!' she'd agreed, and decided to introduce it into her next class. 'Windswept…' announced Helen in her next class (we could hear her through the wall in the staff room) '…is like on a blustery day when all your hair is flying about…' – laughter, she was obviously ruffling up her hair.

She hadn't got very far into her explanation when Adam and Kathleen could be heard bursting in unannounced.

'I'm Windswept!' said Adam – probably combing down his hair for the students,

'And I'm storm-bashed!' – came Kathleen's fluty voice. Then there was a kerfuffle as they beat a hasty retreat. It was all well and good, though Helen didn't see the funny side of it.

When I asked Helen later what she thought the

students had made of Adam and Kathleen's madcap intervention she said – 'They just stared at them like Alsatians watching television.'

'Now Bill, are you coming to Turin?' – it was Maria-Teresa again, badgering me about accepting the offer of a contract with, '… some friends of mine,' she said she had in Turin who ran a language school. (I was later to discover how much friends.) I shrugged my shoulders, and she did the same.

Points West had made a really big effort with the students' farewell garden party, buying a special lorry load of crisps and chessy niblets, along with tanker loads of lemonade and other fizzy drinks. It was an attempt to assuage customers' indignation at having to put up with a goose-stepping megalomaniac around the corridors of Runneymede. (Now safely back in Bahrain.) Betty Burroughs, Don's replacement, had much more of a human touch, and so it was like a transformation from being under the tutelage of 'the Demonic Conqueror of the World' to having the UNESCO ambassador for World Peace arriving at your doorstep.

'I keep telling Bill, Betty… ' he should come out to Turin… he'd like Italy.'

'Oh, you'd like Italy, Bill,' said Betty – I began wondering if Maria-Teresa and Betty were working in concert.

'He could help Georgio at the hospital,' said Maria-Teresa. Betty looked askance, as did I. '… you could see the Turin Shroud,' she went on. 'I could ask the priest' –

I smiled a disingenuous smile. It might have been a must-do on the Victorians Grand Tour of Europe but it was not on mine. 'Then there are the pizzas…' continued Maria-Teresa, whose ability of going from the ridiculous to the sublime was consummate.

'Oh, the pizzas are very good!' said Betty, nodding her head in agreement. 'And there's various gauges…' she said, speaking in a scientific way which Benedict would have appreciated, but perhaps not Adam, who could be seen canoodling in a corner with Kathleen.

'So, are you coming to Turin Bill?... can I speak to my friends?'

And so it was, there and then, at the garden party of the Runneymede School, that I gave the green light to my friend Maria-Teresa getting me a job in Turin – what had I let myself in for?

I would be driving out to Turin. My father had gifted me a red sports car (an Opel Berlinetta) and so, looking like a character from the Italian job (only headed in the wrong direction), I would be setting off for Turin.

But this was not before I had done something close to my heart. For some reason I'd decided that I wanted to do a night club 'turn' again. My angst at Hairfriend Products was long-standing and in 1983, in a bid to buck change, I'd performed at The Monterey Social Club in Liverpool. It must have gone well because here I was, wanting to try again.

No sooner had I walked into the floodlit dressing room at the side of the stage, crammed with photographs of stars, faded and future, when Margaret turned to greet me. She immediately remembered me

from four years ago – clearly I had made an impression.

'Oh, I remember you! … so you're back again,' she said.

Margaret was the accompanying organist at the Monterey. 'I won't let you down,' she said before I went on, and she never did.

Margaret and I chatted before I went on. Sadly she'd lost her husband recently, and as a consequence had lost a lot of weight. I'm not sure what I was after with these turns, of which I've clocked up quite a few now, perhaps it was a narcissistic craving to be noticed.

The kind of act I did was a combination of singing and comedy. You started off with a song, told a few jokes, then it was back to the singing. I'd carefully chosen my songs – Nilsson's *Everybody's Talkin'*, Perry Como's *It's Impossible* and *If*, popularised by Telly Savalas.

The pensioners – for this was 'Pensioners' (Free) Night at the Monterey – always started off with a limbering up, a line dance, where, for a brief moment, *they* were the stars, not you. Oddly you had to book these nights through a talent agency in Liverpool called 'Peter Comish,' you couldn't just turn up on the night.

The songs went better than I expected, especially the Nilsson one where the, '*I'm goin' where the sun keeps shining*,' line did seem to resonate with my TEFL career, both past and present – and future as it turned out. The jokes just about got by.

'Stick at it lad!.. stick at it!' said the compere who'd introduced me. 'Only you need to decide what you're going to do… comedy or singing?... you can't do both.'

I've never known why this should be the case, but what do I know? I was just an English teacher. I remember one old woman asked to speak to me afterwards –

'Oh, thank you! … thank you!' she said, gripping me by the hands firmly. It made it all worth while, and I felt like a star.

That night at the Monterey for me was one of those rare moments in life when you clearly see that there are two paths ahead of you, and the possibility, very real and almost palpable, of choosing the one that you want – Entertainment or TEFL?

The compere concluded my turn by announcing that I would be going to Turin to teach English. Well that was it then, it had been officially announced that I was going to Turin, so I suppose I had better go!

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 7

Mr. Donks and the silver Mercedes

'If you're going to Turin,' said Father, 'you can come with your mother and me. I'm going to buy a Mercedes in Bruges.'

Father was full of surprise announcements like these. He once got me to dig a 4-feet deep hole in a plot of land being sold near St.Helens in 1976. It was with a view to its being a suitable plot of land for his factory. By the time I'd spent several precious weekends of my youth – never to return – digging this hole, he suddenly announced that he'd decided to invest in the ideal place at Knowsley near Liverpool instead – not before I'd dug a damn big hole in St.Helens for nothing.

I came to realise that the TEFL world could be like that hole, tough to cut through, dirty, full of worms, and on occasion, black inside.

As with my Greece trip, I spent time preparing what I thought I'd need for Italy. This included, high on the list, my Italian Linguaphone course, which traced the exploits of the Tosi family from Rome, and the chapters (or units) of their predictable lives. Thus, one unit in the course dealt with *'L'incidente'* (The Accident) and all the

language you'd need for that. There was also, *'Alla Stazioni'* (at the railway station) for, presumably, if you ever found yourself in the Italian version of *Brief Encounter*, stuck between Trevor Howard and Celia Johnston.

Linguaphone was an excellent way to learn a language so long as you could make the language you learned fit in with the circumstances of your life. It was a bit like speaking Italian with a microchip in your brain. Thus, when I got to Italy I would say things like – *'Sto lavorando como pazzo e sono pieno di preoccupazioni.'* (I'm working like a maniac and full of worries.) It was not really that I was, simply that Marco was in Unit Eleven of the Linguaphone course.

At my first school in Italy I'm sure people picked up on this when one day I heard something along the lines of –'You want to watch that guy, he thinks he can speak Italian in chunks, you never know where he's going with it!'

But such was my ignorance in languages when I set out for Italy that September of 1987, and such was my ignorance of my father's determination to execute his elaborate plan of getting his hands on a Mercedes in Bruges.

My father's Mercedes purchase (Mother came along as navigator, even though she couldn't read maps), bore some resemblance to a Continental version of the paper chase. The first piece of paper was the Sunday Times, where he'd spotted the ad. Then there was a Mr.Donks, who had to be contacted. Mr.Donks' office was his house, which was difficult to find as it was on the

outskirts of Bruges, in some unpronounceable small Flemish village, nowhere near Bruges as stated in the ad.

Mr.Donks spoke very little English, and what English he did speak was almost indecipherable due to the acute sibilance in his voice – 'Schhh-o… shh-earch and you will find, no? … sh…,' he said when we arrived. (He had a habit of continuing the sibilance at the end of sentences, as though about to start another sentence then changing his mind.) He also relied heavily on body language, which Father didn't use.

Mrs Donks spoke *absolutely* no English, and hindered rather than helped proceedings (though Mr. Donks probably saw her as an *aide mémoire* when he ran out of hand signals), shrieking with laughter when you opened your mouth, or even if you didn't. The Donks' dog, a Doberman, sat on their shawl-covered settee, observing proceedings passively, not showing its teeth, but suggesting that it had some all the same.

'Sch-o, your sch-on is going to Turin… sh?' said Mr.Donks.

'Eh!' said my father, who'd never done a course in deciphering acute sibilance in Continentals.

'Yes, that's right.' I said

'Oh, good… sch-plendid..! I was-sch… er… beginning to think people was-sch-n't understanding me here-sh…,' replied Mr.Donks.

My father looked blank. He was completely out of his comfort zone. Fortunately the trials associated with the Tower of Babel were not completely strange to me then as now and, as in St.Helens many years before, I

soon found myself digging a hole – but this time with a view to getting us out of one.

'Quella macchina…,' (that car) I said, as Mr.Donks flipped through his catalogue of Mercedes, and pointing at one – I was by now resorting to Italian! – *'…che bella!'* (How beautiful) I said.

'Eh!' exclaimed Mr.Donks, whose turn it was to look around blankly. 'Sch-orry, I'm not… er… under-schh-standing?...sh.'

'Cette voiture, c'est tres bien!' (that car's very nice) – now I was on to the French! His face cleared as though a storm had passed over it, *'Ah, qui, qui…d'accord… c'est magnifique n'est pas?'* (Yes, I agree, it's magnificent isn't it?) he said. Mrs Donks bounced her head from side to side, as if listening to a song in her head.

My father by this time was studying his fold-out timetable for boats back to Folkstone, in between making grunting noises of approval at Mrs Donks, who was proudly showing off her collection of Flemish diary cruets to him.

At last I chose the Mercedes I thought my Father would like and we went with Mr.Donks to pick it up, at the back of his air-strip-sized backyard, where about twenty Mercedes of varying colours were parked.

'Revenué bientot!,' (Come back soon!), said Mr.Donks, as we shook hands enthusiastically, and handing over the car keys to my father once he'd received payment.

We left the Donks' car showroom at the end of the universe and waved goodbye – one of the few gestures of the day everyone had understood – never to return again.

'You see it's a risk, not everyone wants to buy a car abroad…' said Father. (Mother raised her eyes to the car roof.) After that episode I could understand why!

Just before we went our separate ways, me to Italy and they to the channel ports, my parents and I pulled over at a crossroads on one of those French roads which cut the landscape like a laser beam, seemingly going nowhere, but having to go somewhere. Father wished me luck and shook my hand. Mother fought back the tears.

Hairfriend Products awaited them back in England. I just hoped, fervently and earnestly, that the experience that awaited me in Turin wouldn't be hair-raising.

The Oxbridge Academy stood on one of the main thoroughfares, the *Corso Vittorio Emanuele*, which bisected Turin as you came into it from the mountains in the north.

It was on the second floor of a building which looked as though it had been rejected by Count Dracula as being too scary. The outside of the building was of ashen granite with Carrera marble popping up as entrance colonnades, doorway embellishments and bannisters. Entering into the Oxbridge Academy was like stepping back in time to when the Borges held court, either that or entering a set which J.R.Tolkein had given his personal approval to as being the fitting playground for hobbits.

It did not auger well that every time I stepped foot in that building – built as I suppose it was in the heyday of the Gothic Horror revival – the dourness of the place really got to me.

You half expected to bump into Boris Karloff as you turned a corner, so you can imagine my horror when I discovered one day that one of my colleagues was a Boris Karloff lookalike. He even spoke slowly like the Frankenstein's monster that he no doubt had no idea he resembled.

'I g-o-t m-y T-E-F-L experiii-eeence teeea-chchching Puer-r-rtooo Rii-cannns in Newww-York-CCCityyy…' he slurred, as though having suffered from water on the brain as a child.

Another teacher was Carla, a bubbly Italian whose face crinkled up with all the dexterity of a hand-puppet every time you asked her a question – or perhaps it was just me?

Carla was expecting a baby, so in one of the cubby-holes leading off from the main corridor which gave to classrooms she occupied a musty alcove, fleshed out by a sofa. Thus, having retired, she would appear as a Gorgon might from out of its crypt every time you happened to be passing going to or from class – at least she did with me.

'Da-arrghh!.. Carla, you gave me the shock of my life!' I screamed out one day as she materialised before me from her sideways eerie.

'Did I?' she said, looking surprised. 'I'm sorry...' – I sometimes think people have no idea of the strange world they inhabit.

'Yes, but don't worry, that's just me that's highly strung,' I said to reassure her. (I was the one that wanted to be reassured!)

'Oh, temperamental artiste…' she said in hushed

tones. '…you'll do really well here,' – which probably meant I wouldn't last five minutes. She should know, she was well in with Francesca and Antonella, the two shifty-eyed twin sisters who were owners of the Oxbridge Academy and – I had to admit – apparently breakers of bread with my dear friend from Runneymede, Maria Teresa Morrelli.

Pascal, a Belgian teacher in his mid-thirties was another goose-pimple-inducing character who sprang like a banshee from the nooks and crannies of the Oxbridge Academy's stonework. He and Donks would have got on great since they were fellow countrymen, although I suspect that on hearing Pascal speak with his rapid-fire monologues, which he was prone to, even Donks would have shrugged his shoulders and gone – 'eh?'

I was beginning to learn an important lesson first planted in my mind at Runneymede – just because people speak the same language, it doesn't mean that they understand each other. It sounds a bit Nietzsche-like, but true.

In my and Pascal's case matters were simplified because we *didn't* speak the same language *and* we *didn't* understand one another either. That way you have the advantage when it comes to ignoring people, which ownership of the same mother tongue denies you, of – to put it in the common parlance – not being 'ear-ached' by people with whom you feel no affinity.

'Ah, hello there!..' Pascal would cry out as he spotted me along the corridor, cannily observing that if you used the word *'there'* in salutation with a person it gives

out the following message – 'Hello… but as I see that you are located a long way from me (there), there is really no point in me talking further to you… goodbye!'

Less affable than Pascal – who at least had the excuse of geographical distance on his side – were a coven of Italian teachers of English who didn't even bother to acknowledge you, and who walked by like skunks who had forgotten to bubble-wrap their tails.

My first classes at the Oxbridge Academy were therefore coloured by my feeling of being ill at ease there. Yet even humanity can surmount environs which have something of the inhuman or plain spooky about them, and it was not long before, thankfully, I was making friends with the students.

Barbara was a quiet, almost withdrawn student, who dressed exactly like an ancient Egyptian woman would, with heavily accentuated eye-liner and matching off-beat jewellery. (I think she thought she'd been Cleopatra in a previous life.) She spent most of the class trying to mesmerize me with her sphinx-like green eyes. Barbara might have been an odd student, but at least she'd come to the right place.

I even began to believe after a couple of weeks that it was all paranoia on my part, and the cruel gestures, like not offering me a cup of tea at the Oxbridge's 'Meet-the-Teachers' chin wags that the institute set up from time to time, were simply examples of me reading the situation wrong. (Perhaps they were a cup short!)

Maria-Teresa Morrelli, apart from her obvious kindness in getting me the job (a kindness I was beginning to classify in my mind a bit along the lines of

the 'be-careful-what- you-wish-for' type), had also seen to sorting out accommodation for me. I was billeted, I felt, like the phantom of the opera in reverse – this must have been the crypt-like characteristics of the Oxbridge Academy colouring my view at the time – on the top floor, (the 9th) of a '*palazzo*' (literally, 'palace') in the centre of Turin, not far from the school, with an Italian couple – Alberto and Delfina Castellano.

There I got up to speed with my clarinet playing. I would play *Memory* in a downwards direction to anybody who would listen in the wide boulevard below which – if only because they had nowhere to go to fast enough to get away from the sound – I felt sure they did.

This *palazzo* must have been a similar age to the one where the Oxbridge Academy had its operations only, unlike that one, it was not tarred with the overtones of Dr Frankenstein and his monster. No Boris Karloff stomped the stairways of this building, unless it was Signore Berretti, who sometimes returned from work the same time as me, his face blackened from a nearby coal-fired works where he toiled.

During my first few unhappy weeks in Turin my spirits were lifted by visiting my new-found friend Giovanni in Mondovi. Giovanni had a lovely family who were always welcoming and I got on with them all – especially Giovanni's father, Dalmo.

Dalmo would tell stories of the British bombers coming over the mountains to bomb nearby Turin during the war. I began wishing they'd dropped one on Frankenstein's monster's hangout on the *Corso Vittorio Emanuele,* so I wouldn't have to be teaching there.

'Capische?' (Do you understand?), said Dalmo, always eager to see that I'd grasped what he was saying, unlike Mr. Donks. (He just wanted to sell a car!)

I also had an emotional reunion with the architects, Gianni, of key fame, and his sister Grazia (one-sided unfortunately since Mother always discouraged displays of emotion), who said that they would take me to Turin to appreciate the architecture. (I can't remember saying I was interested in architecture, but obviously I must have done.) This we did the following weekend. Giovanni came along too, and after a tour of Turin's hidden architectural treasures, and a trip up Turin's equivalent of the Eiffel Tower (*La Mole Antoneliana)*, from the top of which you get a breath-taking view of the mountains around Turin, sprawling the skyline like upturned egg boxes painted green, we sought retreat in some leaf-encircled café, as it was Autumn now.

Gianni tried to speak to me in English, but as it had been a few weeks since the Southport course his language broke down, and instead he had to listen to my engendering conversation hobbled together from Unit 16 of my Linguaphone course – '*Marco Alla Gelateria.'* (Marco at the Gelateria.)

Back in Turin I'd been keeping from Maria-Teresa my misgivings about the tea-retentive sisters who were supposedly her friends, consequently she must have had no idea about my reservations – or did she? Certainly had she asked me if I was settled… if I was 'fine,' I might well have felt inclined to give Joe's farmyard analogy concerning the pig and shit.

'There's a lot of laughter coming from your classes,' said Francesca one day to me accusingly, tapping her expensive lacquered pen impatiently on the marble-topped desk before her, and looking like some signatory to a peace agreement about to tear it up.

'What about my contract?' I found myself asking. (I wasn't interested in the misguided comment about laughter from the classrooms – how should one teach English to children – through tears and groans of misery?)

'You don't have a contract.' she said casually.

It was true. In my perfect universe I'd assumed that your word counted for something, but then I'd not anticipated stumbling around Dr Frankenstein's pad, where hobgoblins and griffins reigned, and where gargoyles seemed to grimace at you from every fissure and fixture, and where, it was clear, that in the land of the one-eyed TEFL teacher Dismissal is king.

I wandered back to the palazzo and my room with the Castellanos. I considered ringing home and saying I'd turn over a new leaf at Hairfriend Products, but felt that it wouldn't be believed, besides, I didn't want to lose face. For all of the next year (I eventually found other work in Turin) I avoided the district where the Oxbridge Academy lay as though it was the epicentre of Chernobyl. It represented all my disappointments and disillusionments. I even studiously observed tram timetables so as to make sure that they weren't going past and, if they were and I didn't know, which happened at least once, I cussed my incompetence as I never cussed my English teaching while at the Oxbridge Academy.

Delfina Castellano had prepared a special meal to

ease my discomfiture at what Mr. Donks in Belgium might have referred to as – *'La Boot,'* opening a certain compartment of one of his cars.

Signora Castellano shook her head and Alberto, her husband, taking his cue, followed suit.

'Che peccatto!..' (what a pity) '… *ma, che peccatto!,'* (but what a pity) she said repeatedly.

I began talking about music, a great passion of mine, and Delfina took that as a hint to reel off her list of beloved Italian operatic composers. They sounded like a shady firm of Italian solicitors – 'Verde, Puccinni and Mascagni.'

'La Migliore,' (the best), she said, rocketing a finger up in the air.

But Delfina, who spoke no English, also appreciated Rock and Roll, as I discovered when I asked her if she'd heard of *Imagine* by John Lennon.

'Ahhh..!' she sighed, her eyes lighting up suddenly, '… John Lemon!'

The teacher never leaving me for long, I pointed out that it was – 'L-E-N-N-O-N.'

'Si!… si!… si!' (yes, yes) she said, sucking in the air with enthusiasm. *'Che bello!'* (how beautiful), she effused.

I felt that I'd salvaged something satisfying from the disaster of the day – at least I'd taught Delfina Castellano how to pronounce the name of one of Britain's most famous modern composers correctly.

Then this surprising lover of both Opera and Rock and Roll rose wearily from the table, all starry-eyed, and said – 'Ah… John Lemon!'

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page

CHAPTER 8

Finding a second teaching job in Turin

'Look, Bill… a job!' cried Maria-Teresa, as she peeled open a newspaper in her palatial apartment on the *Corso Duca Degli Abruzzi* in Turin, the one that looked like a miniature of The Palace of Versailles from inside. 'And it says they want native speakers…why don't you apply?'

By this time I was even more entrenched in my feelings that I would go back to England, perhaps I could travel around the UK with Hairfriend Products, selling barbers' capes that nobody wanted, I might even get to meet the elusive Pat in Solihull.

'You should at least try,' insisted Maria-Teresa who, flatteringly, and knowing my standards of teaching were good as many of the students had spoken highly of me, seemed to view my going back to England as a waste. Perhaps, looking back, she also enjoyed our occasional afternoon teas when she could field any doubts she had about the English Language, and I would have to bat an answer back –

'What does 'bodger' mean Bill? I can't find it anywhere in my dictionary… is it something we should admire? And what about 'coracle?' What is it?'

I explained both terms in graphic detail, especially coracle, which I said was a small, walnut-shaped boat covered in animal hide, which was used in Anglo-Saxon times to ply up and down rivers. I started wondering if the appearance of a coracle might not improve my Anglo-Saxon verse play, *Olban*, which, with all the traumas going on in my life at that time, I'd naturally put on hold.

Yes, Olban might emerge looking like a dignified tortoise sporting his coracle on his shoulders, hopping wildly about the Fens of England, evading capture from the Normans by simply dunking himself into his coracle and setting off – but then they'd never pin him down, and then there'd be no story?

Maria-Teresa brought me out of my daydream. 'Really language is like a river, don't you think so Bill? Bringing us strange words, like 'coracle.' I had to agree that it was. She made copious notes in a small exercise book that she kept in a drawer inside her writing desk – she didn't wish any words that had even a small walk-on part in her experience of the English Language to escape.

Conversation inevitably turned back to the job advertisement, though nothing was mentioned of her Transylvanian friends who'd been my hosts in that Dracula's castle of a school of theirs for the past few weeks – the creeps who had shoved a wodge of lire in my hand, thinking that it would assuage my offence – well it didn't.

Maria-Teresa copied down the telephone number of a 'reputable' school, she assured me (but she'd said the

same about the other one!) from the newspaper and urged me to ring. I thanked her for the tea and said that I would.

'David', on no accounts 'Dave', was the director of 'The Walter Scott School of English,' a short walk from the *Piazza San Carlo* in Turin. He was eager to know how I'd got to come out to Turin, which I was just as eager to conceal from him. He wanted to know all about my trips around Greece and other countries I'd been to, leading me at one point to think that he perhaps had a job in mind for me as a travel courier.

As is often the ironic way in life, we'd just exchanged views on the many places we had in common on our passport stamps, both in and outside Europe, when we discovered, like fools, that we were from virtually the same town in England.

'Oh, you're from St.Helens?' exclaimed David, stretching back in his chair, suddenly expansive and at ease with himself – 'well I'm from Bickerstaffe… not far from…'

Bickerstaffe was a small village about ten miles from where I hailed from in St.Helens, and a familiar stop on the bus route from St.Helens to Southport. My parents had recently been considering buying the old windmill at Bickerstaffe (another of my father's surprise announcements) and, but for some technical hitch at the last minute, very nearly did.

'Oh, they've done it up!' said David, as conversation turned to the windmill, as naturally and effortlessly as the sails of one.

'I believe so,' I said, concealing the fact that my father had nearly bought the thing – best not go in that direction I thought, otherwise we'd be on to Donks and the silver Mercedes, the hole in the plot of land in St.Helens, and goodness knows where it would all end!

'So, you've not worked for any other school in Turin before?'

It was the question aimed to catch me out, if I was catch out-able, which, by now, with the idea of a year spent in Turin increasingly appealing to me, I was determined I wasn't going to be.

'No,' I lied casually, thinking that, 'absolutely not,' would sound too emphatic and give the game away – I remembered what Maria-Teresa had once pithily observed to me – 'Bill we should never lie… but sometimes it is necessary, no?'

Even so I narrowly averted disaster when, near the end of the interview, I found myself saying in relation to the new school's facilities – 'It's like the other school… ' (I quickly changed track before it was too late) '… *of thought* I mean, which says there are never too many adjuncts to learning...' – phew, in an adroit about-face I'd managed to stop myself from saying, '… *that I worked for*,' which would have been disastrous.

By this time I had completely changed my outlook on Turin and badly wanted to stay for a year – the length of the contract I'd just landed. It was something about the romance of the *'passegiatta'* (a word that translates to 'leisurely stroll' in English) that really appealed to me.

If you had to define it, the *passegiatta* was basically just a chance for people to oggle one another and weigh up the talent. I wanted to live the Latin lifestyle, hopefully meet a Latin girl and hop on to the back of a Vespa on the way back from vespers. I'd spent so many summers of my childhood huddled up in the back seat of a car full to bursting, winding over the Alps on Continental holidays to Italy, that by now the place almost seemed like a second home.

Caravanning had proved the ideal way to spend holidays, especially for Father, since he could indulge his whim for unexpected surprises.

'So, we're going to Lyon today?' would announce Mother confidently.

'No we're not!' would say Father equally confidently, 'I've changed my mind… we're going to Aix-En-Provence instead.'

The result was that holidays on the Continent in those days, the Sixties and the Seventies, were guaranteed surprises – you never knew where you were going to end up!

One particular story of those days sticks in my mind. I had an uncle Derek who worked in Italy for an engineering firm in Milan. One summer my mother and her sister, Dyonese, whose brother he was, were due to go out to Italy to visit Derek with their respective families. Only aunt Dyonese and her family were flying out from Heathrow, while we would be taking the usual overland route by caravan.

At the last minute my grandmother, who lived in Stafford at the time, and thinking that the train taking

my aunt and her family to London stopped at Stafford station, bought a huge wheel of Cheddar cheese. She would get my aunt to pick it up at the station in Stafford she said, and it would be a nice surprise for Derek, who loved the stuff. Only the surprise that no one was expecting was that there was *no* stop at Stafford station (it was a through train), and my grandmother was left standing on the platform at Stafford station while the train to London whizzed by, waving and gesticulating helplessly as a tableau of panic passed from inside the train. (My grandmother complained that she and my grandfather were eating Cheddar cheese for months after that!) It just shows – always pays to check timetables.

My colleagues at the Walter Scott School of English represented a fairly predictable gallery of the weird and wonderful that the TEFL world is apt to come up with in these circumstances; circumstances I've found whereby fellow compatriots either want to have everything to do with you or nothing. You were either a friend or a foe, never something in between. It was important therefore to establish who the allies were and who the enemy were early on.

Laura was a red-cheeked girl, owing I believe to some medical condition she had which you could never quite get to the bottom of. She and her family had left Zimbabwe under a cloud she said, after a fall out with the regime there, which is probably why Laura dedicated most of her free time to the act of pulling it to pieces. She also blamed the regime for her father's unemployment, who she described as being 'like a caged

lion' in Turin. I was to find out through another teacher that Laura referred to me as 'a mess.' This I forgave her for since, having been recently dumped by her boyfriend and constantly going on about Mugabe, I considered that perhaps it was she who was the mess.

Laura I have to thank for a bizarre experience in TEFL which, even all these years later, I'm not sure you would describe as edifying, just memorable.

She'd been due to give a lecture at the 'University of the Third Age' (an organisation whose title slightly freaked me until David assured me that it wasn't 'something religious') somewhere in the maze of urban streets which was largely what Turin was to me at that time. (I soon got to know it better later.)

'You just need to charm them Bill,' said David, outlining my brief.

'Eh!' – I think I exclaimed.

'Oh, they're lovely,' weighed in Laura over the phone when I rang her up from her sick bed. She was peg-nosed with a cold – or was she, I wondered, just peg-nosed? 'You'll have no trouble, you'll see…'

It turned out that this TEFL mission was to explain the machinations of a Mills & Boon writer, Sebastian Rose, to a lecture hall full of bus-pass carrying Italians.

'Good morning!' I said, as an escarpment of multi-coloured garments clogged my vision (Italians are so fashion conscious!) I introduced myself, giving them a potted history of my life to date in about five seconds.

'I've come here today to talk to you about the romantic works of Sebastian Rose… the well-known author of the Mills & Boon classic, *Love Has No Price* –

still no response. Then, slowly, out of the collective rigor mortis, one old lady with a purple rinse and wearing a fur coat, dipped into her handbag, pulled out a pen, and began to write. One or two soon followed suit, but the majority just stared ahead, probably intent on assessing me rather than the works of this Mills & Boon luminary.

I must have gone on for about ten minutes before I noticed that the lecture hall was peppered with bowing heads – they were all drifting off to sleep! Still, not my fault, I consoled myself, but Sebastian Rose's.

At last I took to shouting out certain words of the novella. This had the desired effect of waking up all but the most somnolent members in the audience – after all, I didn't want a mass sleep-in on my hands. The story I was reading to them was of an impossible love between some ageing aristocrat and a woman who'd come to seek him out in his palatial eerie in Greece. 'The hills above Kalamata,' sticks in my mind, which was amazing because that was near where I'd been earlier in that year.

'How did the talk go?' asked Laura, now surprisingly recovered from her cold, the next day.

'Alright thanks,' I said, being as economical with my descriptions as Mills & Boon were *un*economical with theirs. For days afterwards I couldn't rid from my mind phrases like, 'the sunlight-kissed bay,' and 'primrose-enamelled hilltops.' Thoughts which a *café curto* (small coffee) helped banish.

As Christmas approached I started looking for a small bachelor flat to live out my dreams of the outcast artist, rejected by the conventional world, one clinging to a

dream of an old, Olban-trudged England, which nobody cared about anymore except me, and Olban himself of course. A flat of my own would certainly be good for my writing, which Signora Castellano would occasionally catch me at through the split in my bedroom door, and ask me if I wanted a headache tablet.

The fact was I couldn't be creative in the cosy world of my newly-adopted Italian family, lovely though they were, when there was always the excuse to peel *zuccinni* (courgettes) and chat. With romance in my mind – if not to be seen anywhere on the horizon – it would also be an advantage to have my own 'love nest' I thought, some – 'half-forgotten nook… some eerie on the cliffs of Time,' as Jay puts it in *Three Men In A Boat*. Only *I* was not *Three Men In A Boat*, if anything I was like Olban – one man in a coracle.

'You need your independence,' said David, when I explained to him at the school one day that I was flat-hunting.

'I agree,' I said.

Looking back I cannot imagine why I was so keen. Granted, Signora Castellano, bless her, cramped my space, but perhaps I could have explained to the Castellanos my need for solitude, 'to create?' But then Signora Castellano, knowing her, might describe me to her friends as, *'quell' artista Inglese pazzesco,'* (that mad English artist) that lived with them, the sort of comment a spurning of Italian hospitality might easily – and arguably rightfully – engender.

No, I'd miss them, but I had to go, the directionless course of my life at the time, like a ship without a mast,

made me believe with all the misguided certainty of youth, that circumstances demanded it.

So it was with a heavy heart that just before Christmas, after three months with the Castellanos, that I said farewell to them.

'C'é la qualcuno per lavar per ti?' (Is there anybody there to wash for you?) asked Signora Castellano. She was like a second mother to me was Signora Castellano. Clean clothes to her were much more important than any Robinson Crusoe instinct for independence at any cost.

I said I'd be fine, but I spoke too soon – for I was soon to be hand-washing clothes like a river dweller at the sides of the Ganges, worried that the water was about to run out.

'Ce vediamo!,' (see you soon), called out Signor Alberto, opening a set of perfectly-formed white teeth. It was Signor Alberto I had to thank for the all-important correction of my *'se'* (if) in Italian.

'Si' is 'yes', but *'se'* (a much shorter sound), means 'if', and is used when stating any conditional sentence, such as – 'If I had a Ferrari instead of an Opel, I'd have more pulling power with the girls,' – a hypothesis I often considered. I was grateful to Signor Alberto for the correction since from now on I would never mix up the two, and instead of saying –

'Yes, I said you have a beautiful body, hold it against me.' It would be –

'If I said you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me?'

Not that I would say that of course, still, nothing like clarity!

'So, you are moving a-house,' said Maria-Teresa, whose only crime against the letter 'h' in English was occasionally trying too hard with it.

'I've decided I need my independence,' I told her.

'Your independence!' she gave me a look as though I'd been on a Scout camp for a week and now thought I was Baden Powell. 'But Bill… the washing up?… and the cooking? … and the cleaning?'

'Er, I have coped on my own before you know…' I said stuffily, remembering my pig-in-a-poke existence in Tripoli.

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely,' I said, heeding her own canny maxim on the subject of lying, that sometimes it was necessary. The main problem I had at the time was communicating in Italian with Italians. Reluctantly, I had to admit that my prowess in the language never stretched very far from the experience of the Tosi family in my Linguaphone course who, like my evil keepers, often kept me talking about the episodes (quite literally) of *their* lives, not mine.

'Listen, I will help you get a flat Bill,' said Maria-Teresa, with a resolute nod of the head – a very *Piedmontese* gesture.

'Oh, thank you… very kind of you Maria-Teresa,' I said, sipping the last runes of my tea.

The Gallos were an elderly couple who had a fascinating slew of children, all grown up and left home by now and whose lives were the stuff of a Gothic horror novel.

This much I know since in the first ten minutes of our meeting with the Gallos they talked ceaselessly about, *'i nostri capretti,'* (our children), with the odd adjective like, *'meraviglioso,'* (marvellous) and *'brillante'* (brilliant) thrown in.

This much even I was able to glean with my limited Italian as Maria-Teresa stood at my side listening, with a lob-sided head, patiently to them.

The esteem however appeared to be all one-sided since for the six months that I was to stay with the Gallos as their tenant in the small flat beneath their house, I never once clapped eyes on their remarkable children, nor for that matter, with one or two rare exceptions, them.

They announced to Maria-Teresa that they would be proud to have the, 'tortured artist' (perhaps I'd misheard!) up in their sumptuous dining room, which they promptly showed us around, and which I never saw again. They were sure I would be *'molto felice,'* (very happy) with them they said.

'Is it a noisy area?' I asked.

'Is it quiet?' Maria-Teresa followed up.

Signor Gallo immediately sucked in the air with conviction - *'Oh, si!… si!... senz' altro,'* (yes… yes, without doubt), he said assuredly, *'molto tranquillo'* (very quiet.)

Maria-Teresa turned to me. 'He says it's very quiet around here Bill… you should be very comfortable.'

'Comfortable!' – Argos, or whatever his name was, the mad Alsatian who lived in next door's ground floor flat, barked incessantly, sometimes through the night, always managing to wake me up by about 5 am. (I

found that the easiest thing to make life bearable was to get up at the same time.)

'Perhaps you could get a-ear plugs?' said Maria-Teresa, mixing the singular and the plural in her anxiety to be perfect when I told her. 'But I don't like them myself…,' she said 'they make my feel a-dizzy' – she was not alone. '… but Mr. Gallo never said anything about noisy dogs? … really Bill, you are quite unlucky.'

As I surveyed the *signorine* (young women) sensually laughing and swaying doing the *passeggiatta* down the *Corso Duca Degli Abruzzi*, I concluded that in reality I had two misfortunes to battle with – one, unlucky with love and two, unlucky with accommodation.

I'd not long got settled (perhaps that should be *un*settled) into the Gallo's noisy flat in Nichelino, just outside the centre of Turin, when Giovanni rang the school.

'Savagliano rang,' chirped Donatella, the friendly school's secretary. I got back to him as soon as I could after class.

'Nicholino!' You're there!' exclaimed Giovanni, a trace of horror detectable in his voice.

'Why, what's wrong with Nicholino?' I asked.

'It's a drug-pushing area, didn't you know?'

No, I didn't – and neither did the Gallos apparently, or did they? Of course! Now it all made sense – Argos the mad dog who barked on and off through the night, he was probably roused by drug traffickers (not that my sympathy for his regular cannonades lessened any,) and the furtive characters I'd peered at through my window's iron bars – making me look like the Man in

the Iron Mask from outside no doubt – they were probably saying to themselves, 'You'll need that!'

'*I have to move*.'

'You have to move,' echoed Maria-Teresa – why is it that in a crisis everybody repeats what you're saying?

'But Bill, it's very difficult to find a flat in Turin, especially when…,' she changed her sentence at the last minute '… especially at this time of year,' she said.

What she really meant to say was, 'when you're trying to rent a place and using Unit 15 'Marco's visit to the zoo' to do so…

I kicked through the fallen leaves along Turin's wide boulevards. I often walked if I had time between lessons and wasn't needed at the school. It gave me time to think. Sometimes Olban would spring up and accompany me. He was like a chess piece on the chessboard of his own eponymous verse play, and he would run alternately, well or badly, on the chessboard of my own real-life drama – my own domestic hell at the time more like!

Probably for that reason little was added to the verse play I started in Greece during those turbulent days in Turin – Olban thought *he* had troubles!

As though I didn't have enough to contend with it was about then that romance came into my life. I'd got to know many teachers at other schools in Turin by now. Indeed in the evening the cafes, restaurants and bars were teaming with ex-pats, all plying their own tales of travels in Teflonia – the strange land of English

teaching we all inhabited. Occasionally it was as if they were trying to out-vie each other –

'I heard spies the other day in Turin,' said Dominic.

'You're kidding!' said Wendy, a gregarious, sporty teacher from Walsall.

'No I'm not… it was on the tram,' said Dominic.

'What did they say?'

'I can't tell you that,' he said.

'Why ever not?' asked Wendy.

'Because when they got to the crux of what they were saying, we went over the points… they were probably just waiting for that…' he added tapping his nose.

'Durrr!,' went Wendy, and turned to talk to the others.

Then there was Aiden, who slumped into the *Caffè* Livorno after classes each day.

'What's the matter with you Aiden?' I said to him one day because he was looking so glum.

'Oh, it's my student, Consenza Figgi… she's a real bitch.'

Signora Figgi was a twenty-something high-flying exec at FIAT who walked around the Walter Scott School as though she owned it.

'She thinks she knows English better than I do… and she complains to David about my classes,' whimpered Aiden.

I sympathized with Aiden, although thankfully I had no such awkward customers myself – only unusual ones, like Antonio, who at seventy-five had decided to learn English.

Antonio had vivid recollections of Turin full of

Germans during the war and occasionally, in response to some question or other I asked him, he would look up appealingly into my eyes and say –*'Jahr!'*

Or Virginia Mancino, who was another high-flying exec with FIAT, at the other end of the age spectrum to Aiden's bridling maiden though. She couldn't hold in any English except for the phrase, '*total immersion*.' It seems that Signora Mancino had a total immersion course in English around 1968 and never recovered from it. She ricocheted around we teachers like some frantically flippered pin-ball that nobody wanted to be stuck with and so had to be kept on the move. She'd come into the classroom and immediately swamp you with Italian, until she reminded you of the 'total immersion' course she'd once taken, a course of which the only thing she could remember was its title. Classes with Signora Mancino were therefore truly total immersion – for you in Italian!

'Can't you ask David to switch?' I said, turning to the subject of Aiden's dissatisfied student once more.

'She doesn't want to change,' he said 'it's almost as if she craves the power.'

This struck a chord with me, students might ask to change teachers, but it was rarely the other way round – that went against the grain of free enterprise English Language teaching.

'I mean it brings on an instant depression,' continued Aiden, '… I went for a walk down to the Po' (Turin's river) '… just to clear my head, only I found they were pulling a body out of the river.'

Aiden seemed to have an attraction for the wrong

student, like Midas had for unbidden alchemic transformations, since his haughty exec was not the only disappointment he had in this line. He'd been ecstatic I remember to get a private student, only to have to drop her promptly when he discovered that the ceiling of her flat – where she'd insisted lessons were taken – was tiled completely in mirrors, that along with some other suspect behaviour she threw his way meant that he'd had to forgo this much needed income. I was not completely surprised therefore when I learnt that Aiden had not returned to the school after Christmas.

These were just some of the stories that could be heard around the tables of the 'watering holes' in Turin – meeting up places that were described in exactly that way by we teachers. It was while sitting in one of these ex-pat playgrounds that Rachel first stepped into my life.

Rachel was a teacher at one of the schools whose method of teaching English was focussed on the audio-lingual, which inevitably meant carrying around a lot of cassette players and tapes. It was moribund with such paraphernalia that she crashed into the *Caffè* Livorno in Turin, which happened to be my watering hole too.

'Do that voice again.' She said.

'What voice?' I replied.

'The Liverpool accent.'

'But I haven't got a Liverpool accent.' I said.

'You have now.'

It was typical of the witty, fast-fire repartee that Rachel indulged in around Turin's trendy ex-pat places. I fell for her charms like the fish must for the bated

hook, though what I did not know then, and was only to find out some time later, was that Rachel went fishing in many of the teeming bars of Turin.

There followed a whirlwind romance of about one year. No, I wasn't going home at Easter because Rachel had said something about going with her and her never-ending succession of friends to some place or other. Thankfully during this rollercoaster ride that was my relationship with Rachel I managed to keep my friendship with Giovanni, and my social links with Mondovi, which was my escape.

However Rachel disapproved of my Mondovi connections, and was constantly pressing me to forsake the mountains for the city. The whole landscape of my year and a bit in Turin was therefore reduced to something of a blitzed city.

'Go back to England!' urged Rachel one day out of the blue. 'I'll cope fine without you… you owe it to yourself' – it was amazing how Rachel made assumptions that bore no relationship to things as I saw them.

'But we could be together… we could marry?' I said to her one day.

'You're a boy, I'm a woman,' was her reply.

True, Rachel was a few years older than I was, a fact that left undiminished my demented state in wanting her, and only her.

'Oh, marriage is an outdated institution… I don't believe in it…,' she said one day '… I'm a free spirit… you owe me nothing… we're quits.'

Such were the savage stabs with which Rachel

ended her relationships it would seem. But what did I know? I was just a boy – according to Rachel I was anyway – a dreamy youth of twenty-something, picturing as perfect in my mind the fauna-filled mountainsides of the Italian Alps, which by now were bursting to the flow as it was late spring, and trying to climb them with Giovanni in Mondovi. I was like a hay-seed blown in the wind – but I wanted to be an alpine hero, someone secluded from the real world with his or her own little perfect one, one that seemed to be located somewhere around Mondovi.

I was not always thinking of coursing streams and hillside bouquets however, since with the Rachel episode I'd missed out on loves that might have been, like Signora Andreatta, the enthralling journalist with a smile to seal a thousand sunsets (… now who was sounding like Mills & Boon's Sebastian Rose!), or lovely Christina, a perfect goddess of a woman to my eyes who bestrode the romantic world like a Colossus – even if that analogy is a little unflattering.

As school ended in June I felt glad to be leaving my tormented flat in Nichelino at last. I explained to Signor Gallo that my contract was up at the Walter Scott and that consequently I was returning to England.

'Che bello!' (How beautiful) he said idiotically, not knowing, or if so forgetting, how beautiful Italy is in the summer months, only to be forsaken for English shores, with their August showers, by the most ardent Anglophile. I explained to him how Argos the mad dog had robbed me of much sleep, and to my astonishment he said that the previous tenant had left for exactly that

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page 104

reason! He also wanted to know if I'd be returning to Turin after the summer, in which case, he said, perhaps I could stay with them? – some people have the most outrageous expectations.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page 105

CHAPTER 9

The pull of Turin and 'La Dolce Vita'

I'd wasted the best part of the new term flitting back and forth between England and Italy, vainly trying to rekindle a chaotic and impossible love with Rachel, and in the process make my life even more miserable.

'I'll have to charge you if you change your mind again,' said the suddenly belligerent-turned woman at the ticket office for Continental trains at Lime Street in Liverpool – I was always shifting my departure times to and from Italy. Sometimes I flew, and I dare say I created similar havoc.

Rachel would say she was coming back to England with me then, at the very last minute, throw her packed bags down to the floor, turn to me and say – 'You go… I'm staying.'

I rented an attic room – something I'd always wanted – near to Turin's *Porta Susa* railway station. It was not long before I began to feel a prisoner. On slack days, when I had no work, which was often, I'd go to the vast Dickensian rooms off the *Corso Vittorio Emanuele* which, ironically, I'd just vacated. Finding some excuse for passing by, since there I'd be sure to

meet Signora Pagani, who always lifted my spirits with a chat.

Signora Pagani was around seventy and as lithe as a reed. She cleaned the rooms in the old and musty tenements that had been converted for renting out, and in that sense her work was like the trials of Sisyphus, never-ending, in that the mustiness was constantly lingering. One positive note was that by now, with regular trips to Mondovi to see Giovanni and his family, I was shedding the umbilical of my Linguaphone course.

'Ah, you're there!' said Signora Pagani 'you run round like a chicken that's lost its head!' – she really had me sized up alright.

She regales me with some incident or other that happened to her in Turin.

'I bought a fish today at the market, and as I was carrying it home in the newspaper its severed head winked at me… can you believe that *winked* at me!' Or it might be – 'Be careful if you go buying coconuts…' (as if I would) '… I've just heard from a reliable source that some have high-explosives hidden inside them… oh yes… some terrible mix-up with old Partisan munitions left over from the war apparently.'

These were the sort of stories Signora Pagani trotted out. She should have been on the stage, not cleaning floors in tenements where her talents were wasted.

One day I was rushing down the stone outer steps of these tenements when I slipped and broke my ankle.

'Serves you right!' says Signora Pagani the next day, shaking her head when I turn up with my leg in plaster and on crutches. 'I'm always telling you to mind the grease

on those steps… they're full of it!' (This was rich coming from someone whose job it was to clean them.) 'You come here like Casanova… abandoning Venice because it's sinking… gallivanting around Turin like a chicken that's lost its head … then you expect *me* to be sympathetic? … well I'm not! …ha!... you won't go so fast next time!' she scolds me through slack stretches of her mop – that was the gist of how Signora Pagani philosophised on how the fates had doled out their lot for me.

It was about when the plaster came off from my ankle that the scales finally fell from my eyes in relation to Rachel. I booked an overnight *couchette* (a kind of moving bunker in a train compartment that no longer exists) to Paris. I was abandoning my Italian dream and as I saw it at the time, Rachel too. Looking back we probably messed up each other's lives in equal proportion. I knew I had to get my life back on to some sort of course, preferably one that would find me better qualified in TEFL.

Back in England, by now late November, I had succeeded in sealing off all career opportunities for myself by returning to Turin.

'I don't want to hear the name Turin again!' said Father, who had not approved of my relationship with Rachel, nor had Mother for that matter.

I scoured the newspapers looking for a TEFL course, and eventually found one in Manchester, only the start date was almost a year away – I'd have to go on the road with Hairfriend Products until then.

Reluctantly, and with Mother's connivance, Father

had drawn up a plan to keep me out of his hair for at least a year. I would criss-cross the UK doing selling and marketing. I'd be a free agent, answerable to only two powers – my parents and my ego. In some ways it was a great opportunity, but it was not the life of the international traveller I secretly still craved for.

There followed many months of travelling to colleges up and down the country, many of whom bought our overalls for their Hairdressing and Beauty courses. I remember my astonishment one time heading north at passing a house whose sides were open to the elements – it was Lockerbie, and what I was witnessing was the aftermath of the PAN-AM disaster.

The time passed quickly and I found I enjoyed falling into conversation with hard-to-follow Scotts, or neighon indecipherable Liverpudlians. If I'd seen some of Europe's spoken oddities, I was now seeing something of my country's own. If people had one thing in common, despite their diverse tongues, it was this bizarre language of communication whose parameters were in reality quite fuzzy (the episode of Donks in Belgium had shown how it was possible to buy a Mercedes with very little spoken language.)

One of the first things I did when I got back from Italy was to sort out a little place for myself just outside St.Helens. Rebecca, my very tolerant and understanding landlady, let me have the run of her house in return for helping her to pay the mortgage on it. Occasionally she'd check up on me with Malcolm, her boyfriend, just to make sure I think that I hadn't converted her lovely house into a heliport. This was where I stayed when I

was not running up and down the country. It was here also that I finally got to finish my epic verse play *Olban* started in Greece. Taking the line of least resistance Olban had eventually surrendered to the encroaching Norman forces. His daughter had married the son of a Norman noble and – suddenly – everybody was happy families. In fact, if he were to tell the truth, Olban didn't know what all the fuss had been about! If it was not quite the 'fight them on the beaches' ending I had originally anticipated, it must have been a reflection of my state of mind at the time.

As part of the course starting in October I'd been asked to find two week's teaching experience at a school near to where I lived. By sheer coincidence Peggy, who shared the jacuzzi with me at the health club which I'd now joined, together with a scrum load of other health fanatics, said I could do my teaching experience with her at the 'Swallows Lane Primary School,' just outside St.Helens. I might have known she'd be open-minded on the subject, as the jacuzzi episode seemed to suggest –

'At first I thought… I'm not getting in there with THAT lot… and now look at me!' said Peggy, wallowing about in the jacuzzi.

The Swallows Lane Primary School was like a thousand up and down the country – a denizen of chaotic, methodless learning, now probably cramped into non-existence by the National Curriculum. But then it hadn't really taken hold so teachers, as I noticed, ploughed their own furrow.

'Bill, maybe you could tell the kids a story,' said Harriet, a teacher.

'Fine… what sort of story?' I asked.

'Anything.'

'Leonardo De Vinci? – I'd just been reading a book about him.

'Great!' said Harriet. 'Feel free to throw in a bit of maths and physics if you like' – the classes were beginning to sound like an Irish stew.

'Really?' I said. 'Wouldn't that be a bit of a mix?'

'Oh, it all mixes up anyway,' she said, striding off down the corridor with a backward wave of the hand.

I cadged a box of plastic straws from the canteen, having quickly boned up on some elementary physics, and spliced one end –. I was going to demonstrate how vibration produces sound.

'Now this is the sort of thing that interested Leonardo Da Vinci in Italy back in 1500… wheels… cogs… inventions, not just the Mona Lisa' – hopefully that should take care of Harriet's mixing up I thought.

'Please Sir!'

'Yes, Leah?'

'Where did Leonardo Da Vinci get his plastic straws from in Italy in 1500?'

Francis, a man with a paunch that seemed to grow by the day, as though he injected himself with yeast every evening, was in charge of overseeing my observation.

'So, you've been to Greece!' he said through clenched teeth, which made me think he was jealous, 'where were you?'

'Tripoli,' I said – he looked agog.

'Isn't that in Libya?'

'Everyone makes that mistake. It's Tripoli on the Peloponnese.' I said.

'Oh, I see…' he said, looking as though he was going to change the subject, only he wasn't. 'I wanted to teach in Greece once… I saw an advertisement for a school in a newspaper, so I sent it off to the union,' he chuckled, '… they said don't touch it with a barge pole!'

Francis was an example of a teacher who could have scaled Everest, and brought rare species back from the dingiest retreats of the rain forest – if only his Teaching Union had let him!

'Not prepared to take a risk,' said Mother when I mentioned it to her.

'Have you heard the wall's coming down?' said Francis excitedly one morning.

'Which wall?'

'The B-E-R-L-I-N wall of course,' he said exaggeratedly – crowing over my being slow on the uptake.

It seems impossible to comprehend now, twenty years on, but at the time the Berlin wall, or 'Iron Curtain' as it was also known, was such a permanent fixture of Europe it was almost geographical – it was a bit like saying 'the Giant's Causeway's down'.

That summer, before the course started, and after a few weeks teaching English with Runneymede in Southport once more, I went back to Mondovi to teach elementary English to Dario and Diego – three and seven, and Giovanni's nephews. I was over the moon to have the

chance to return to Italy without the prospect of any real work, and like the primary school, I'd be teaching them exactly what I fancied. In the end *Humpty-Dumpty* and *London Bridge* were the staples of the boys' regimen of English, along with any other nursery rhymes I could remember. (It's amazing how much English is in them.) My keep was in exchange for keeping Dario and Diego speaking English – I'd discovered the perfect system of barter!

Giovanni's uncle, also called Giovanni, and aunt, Carla, had a brand new camper van and they took me off discovering Piedmont (re-discovering in their case.) It was the kind of summer that you didn't want to end.

The crows around the Basilica at Vicaforte – a glorious building just outside Mondovi with a welter of amazing whirls and garnishes – prodded their beaks at your feet, looking for titbits. While they did so, Paolo, an expert historian at Turin University whom the De Luca family knew, showed up and addressed the surrounding poplars as to the rich and fascinating history of Piedmont – this was because audiences for tales as esoteric as these were hard to come by.

As is the Continental way, hours were passed travelling down the centuries with Paolo (I think I was the only one to accompany him) as the sun travelled across the mountain tops, finally arriving at the mauve mischief of early evening and dusk.

'Well, thank you Paolo for that fascinating account,' said Giovanni, stretching his arms and getting the camper ready for the off. The crows by now had gone, and only the sanctuary of Vicaforte stood silent and

timeless – waiting for the next flurry of visitors to use its location as an excuse for relaxation and picnics.

While walking around the market in Mondovi one Saturday, I bumped into Silvano.

Silvano had been among the group of Italians learning English with Giovanni in Southport. He unfortunately introduced himself to people in England as the, 'ticket muncher' on Italian trains. In fact what he wanted to say was 'ticket puncher' (or 'guard'), but he always came out with this much more entertaining version.

One day when Giovanni needed to go to Turin Silvano kindly offered to drive me over the mountains to Cerialli, which is basically Piedmont's popular Mediterranean seaside town, and I accepted.

That evening we fell into company with two Italian women at a dance club. One of them had been suffering from depression and sought help from her doctor, who was the friend with her at this dance club. Her doctor friend, feeling she needed to get out and about, clearly saw the remedy to her patient's dilemma in swaying of the hips.

You can imagine my astonishment when I bumped into Silvano the following summer and he told me that the doctor had been having an affair with the other woman's husband!

Also memorable from that holiday was the unlinguistic opera singer. This was a man bedecked in bow tie and tuxedo that Giovanni and I had huddled into a packed out church to see sing *Old Man River*.

The priest introduced the rotund middle-aged

crooner as – 'an Italian who's travelled to the United States and come back with some of its music that he would like to sing for you.' This should be good I thought.

With an opening parry, he immediately quelled the audience –

'Old man river…'

The only problem was that the rest of the words were complete and utter gibberish. I wondered if perhaps he'd been on that Total Immersion course with Signora Mancino back in 1968.

Next he vandalised 'Summertime' with a cascade of babyish gabbles and mad phonetic inventions. Summertime indeed! He might have ruined Gershwin's Summertime but thankfully, seeing the funny side, he didn't ruin mine.

Driving back from Cerialli, Silvanno and I past a village with a most unusual name. It was called *'La Boca'* (the Hole) in Italian because when you drove into it you sank precipitously into a dip – hence the name. I could just imagine a citizen of that fair village being shown around the National Gallery in London by a guide –

'And where do you come from in Italy?' might ask the guide.

'The Hole,' would come the conversation-stopping reply.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page 115

CHAPTER 10

A further TEFL course in Manchester

Once again the boomerang of finding accommodation had come round to keep me busy. I'd attended the cheese and wine introduction on the new course in the centre of Manchester, where I was about to meet the by now all-too familiar travelling explorer's cage of wild and exotic birds that largely constituted the profile of the typical TEFL teacher.

Some people were there because they wanted to see a bit of the world, others because they had no other idea of what to do. Ages ranged from early twenties to one woman, Dot, who was in her late forties and had spent years raising ostriches and other strange birds in South Africa until, at the age of forty-seven, she'd decided to take a TEFL course, and so become one.

Ken on the other hand had got tired of living on benefit in Crewe and decided to go in for TEFL so he could get to somewhere less familiar than the rolled up bed sheets of his bedsit every morning – at least that's what he said.

Sean, who was tall, athletic and ex-Public school, was keen to spread the fact around the cabal of chattering TEFL trainee teachers.

'This wine's definitely South African,' he said assuredly.

'The label says Limoges,' pointed out Penny, a child-like teacher with an auburn skin-head haircut like Sinéad O'Conner's, who said she'd been put off the UK because of the Poll Tax, hence the TEFL course.

'Oh, right,' said Sean, blagging, '… still tastes like it though… I drank loads of the stuff in South Africa… when I was invited to go there on safari in the Transvaal… my friend's Dad from school is High Commissioner in Malawi you know?'

We didn't – until then.

'You know Malawi?' piped up Tony from Dumfries, '… that was near where I was teaching… in Lesotho.'

It turned out that Tony had spent two years teaching in Lesotho, and like an entirely plausible character from an adventure story that Rider Haggard never wrote, enjoyed almost the status of a king there. Except that Lesotho had a king already – well a chief – so perhaps Tony only played second fiddle, as did the Lesotho Ambassador with whom, Tony assured everyone, he'd regularly dined.

Tania Evans, a timid girl, fresh from the valleys of Wales, sat back from this freshers' bizarre of the 'First-To-Be-The-Best-Traveller-Around-The-World Competition.' Everybody had a story – but not everybody wanted to tell it.

I eventually tracked down a room going free (free in the sense of vacant, not that you hadn't got to pay for it) conveniently on a busy bus route going into Manchester. This was the Mancunian overspill of Eccles.

Eccles was another blast from the past in that it was here that 'Beauty's Kingdom' plied business; a smart hairdressing salon I'd sold garments to in the past. I decided not to call on Mrs Hedley, its affable owner, since as attentive as she was to any story you had to tell (I've found this to be a trait in hairdressing), she would surely find the transformation I had undergone a little too weird for comfort, and it might set her mouth in a permanent lacquered freeze, besides she might not remember me.

The landlady that interviewed me for a meagre room in her London brick semi on the frantically busy Half Edge Lane in Eccles reminded me forcibly of Mrs Haversham from *Great Expectations*. She was in her late fifties, and it was as if some great shock in her life had set her face into a permanent mask of bewildered suspicion. I did all the talking, she did all the looking. It was one of those occasions in life where you feel that you have to do a little verbal dance in order to get what you want. When finally she told me the room was mine I half expected her to say – 'You may go now Pip.'

Settling back to college felt strange as it had been almost ten years since I'd left university and in the time in between I'd forgotten how, on many days, student life can move in slow time. The lectures were a daily grind, and while not a smoker myself, I can well sympathise with a friend who once told me that he evaluated lectures on the number of *Rizzlers* he managed to roll. If the lectures were bad, the tutorials were even worse. I think it fair comment to say that the lecture is a generic mass feet-bashing, whereas the tutorial is a more

grizzly and personal affair, involving a chamber full of horrors, like the thumb screw, the scold's bridle, and of course, the rack.

Tutors do not intend this outrageous assault on your precious time of course, it is just that for their job's sake they cannot help themselves. As they're tutoring you they're probably thinking that they wouldn't change places with you for the world, either that or it's the opposite type, the 'Prima Donna' tutors.

The Prima Donna tutor (or lecturer for that matter) is keen not to be dismounted from his or her hobby-horse of showing off, which a rogue question might easily effect, which is why generally they don't ask for many. On The TEFL course I attended in Manchester's busy city centre there were plenty of both types.

Pat McDonald was definitely a prime specimen of the more egotistical type of tutor, one who froze you out with her ice-pool, Arctic blue eyes, defying you to ask a question that didn't fit in with her grand scheme of things – or if you were late. She was quite renowned on the course for having introduced a system of teaching English based on colours. Verbs were 'red', adjectives, 'yellow', adverbs 'green,' that sort of thing, and in this paint-by-numbers approach to English, woe betide… anybody…*anybody*… who made fun of it. To Pat's mind this 'methodology' was akin to the code-breakers of Bletchley Park, only slightly more important. Having grown up in South Africa Pat had a noticeable foreign accent, a fact I suspect which she hated but could do nothing about.

'This' she pronounced as 'thus.' 'O' was pronounced

as 'ow' (as in 'owl'), while 'are' came out like 'air' leading me to believe that perhaps she'd passed some time in Australia. It was not surprising that Pat tried to simplify any word in English into colours, after a variety of accents she probably craved some organisation. Though perhaps she craved too much organisation since word was she was recently divorced.

'*Air* we all clear about that?' asked Pat after an early exposé of her fantastic theory. '*Bull*, you're very quiet,' she said, '… everything alright?' – I'd resigned myself to being known as 'Bull' from now on.

I nodded my head enthusiastically. Unlike some of my fellow students I'd had enough experience of the working world to know that it is better sometimes to heed what Dom Quixote says to Sancho Panza – 'keep your eyes wide open, and your mouth tight shut,' only sometimes I forgot it.

Yet even this excellent maxim was impossible with Pat, since unfortunately the applause that she so ardently awaited for her far-flung theory was that you *actually* understood it. This earned me an early enemy badge at college when I showed that I – for one – did not.

'*Thus* is not acceptable Bull!' moaned Pat to me one day, peeling over the pages of a lesson plan I'd done, looking on critically, simply because I'd omitted her precious colour-coding – 'You're not showing how the words function!'

'Work, do you mean?' I replied.

'Function…' she corrected stiffly. '… in relation to each other.' She went on, fulminating underneath I could see, and skipping through my plan backwards, as

though that helped. She was now reaching boiling point. 'Look… red words…' (by that she meant *verbs*) '… go under this column here… ' she said, pointing to an empty column on my sheet of paper '…that's simple enough isn't it?' Suddenly a phrase escaped my lips without really knowing how –

'But what if students are colour blind?' – so much for Dom Quixote's sterling advice.

'*Thus* is not what I've taught you… you're not following my method!' she shouted, as though I'd broken her doll's house.

The Pat incident was to bounce back cruelly on me when I handed in a dissertation kow-towing to her colour scheme method at last, which was easy enough to follow if you really wanted to, it's just that I didn't.

'That's slightly better,' she said grudgingly one day, though I didn't believe her.

In my classes grammar took a back seat to focussing on words students might enjoy through drama, or other spontaneous activities, they could always find out what they did later. However this was anathema to someone like Pat, who required an ordered universe. 'I just can't function without structure,' she was once famously overheard to say – it might sound dramatic for her, but it was hardly *Coronation Street.*

Perhaps Pat needed to be marooned for a year in some remote recess of the Amazon rain forest where she could colour code marching armies of soldier ants to her heart's content.

Frank Betteridge was one of the few members of staff who seemed remotely human, though even he had

his foibles. He had this thing about the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), whose demise he kept banging on about, like King Arthur lamenting the disappearance of Camelot (the castle that is, not the lottery company.)

Back at my comfortable digs in Eccles I was getting along great with my fellow tenants (the house was split into several rented-out rooms.) Liz was a Chemistry research assistant at Salford University and Eileen shoved books around a counter all day in Manchester city centre. Al, who was twenty-two, looked like a beach comber who'd decided to search the beach of education for a change, trundling down the old-fashioned stair-rodded staircase each day, ruffling the bush that was his hair, then sitting down to read the Daily Mail for the best part of the morning. Al's course was so vague I never got to know what it was he actually did, except that I did know that he spent hours cutting open frogs and other obscure amphibians.

Liz abhorred cruelty to animals and as an avowed vegetarian often grumbled about the fridge being full of, 'dead bodies,' which usually turned out to be a tray of sausages I'd just bought from Quiksave. I could take a hint – but I wasn't going to buy my own fridge.

For a school where I was practising at the time Liz kindly agreed one day to speak into a cassette for some Bangladeshi and other ethnically-diverse students I had to teach. Her slow tempoed Mrs Slocum enunciations sounded just great, yet when I played it back to the students they just shook their heads.

The months rolled by and in the hallway of Half Edge Lane light patches ran around like zephyrs on the loose from the stained glass door with its Ribena-coloured panes. The teaching at the school in Salford was going badly. I'd succeeded in rubbing up no less a figure than the headmaster of the school himself when, in my second week, noticing that there were always plenty of empty parking spaces at the front of the school while at the rear it was cramped, I decided to take advantage of the fact and planted my Opel Berlinetta right next to his upstaged Austin Allegro. Within seconds he materialised.

'You don't park there!'

'I know… but there are all these spaces so…' I said, not finishing.

'It's round the back for you,' he said, and stormed off.

I wished I'd been a Battle of Britain pilot, just so I could have given him a mouthful. It was a classic example of how the invisible barriers of class always have to be upheld in Britain, lest she sink beneath the waves. Yet I noticed that no barriers applied to him in the canteen as he nuzzled up to Uté, the German exchange teacher, whose low cut blouse he seemed to take an obsessive interest in.

In January it was my birthday, I'd just turned thirty, and I invited some friends on the course to my digs on Half Edge Lane. Tania came along bearing a cake, and thankfully conversation steered away from the weird personalities of the course – present company excepted – and instead drifted towards the timeless exploration

of trivia and idle chatter – the best type of conversation there is. The evening was an 'oasis of ease in a sea of adversity,' a phrase which I might well have used in *Olban*, but didn't, anyway it was now finished. I was grateful for the comic relief that friends invoke as – just for a moment – all preoccupations were lanced like a bubble with joyous laughter.

In February I went out to Oporto (or Porto as it's often called) to continue my teaching with the foreign element to my course. Though I was not to know it at the time, it was a first step in a journey that would lead me to making my life in Portugal.

'The Gil Vincent School' just outside Porto was an uninspiring school which looked as though it had been built by an architect set loose on the buildings you can sometimes put together from the back of cornflake boxes (or used to be able to.) You found your classroom along a corridor resembling an aircraft boarding bridge and would spring into it, with a similar amount of foreboding, at least I did.

'Hello children!.. this is your teacher… Mr.Roby,' said Maria-Gloria – Maria-Gloria was supervising my teaching while at Gil Vincent.

In Portugal with women of a certain age, sixty or over, as Maria-Gloria was, you can shout out, 'Maria' and all women's heads will turn around. This is because for that age group 'Maria' usually goes in tandem with some second name, like 'Filomena' or 'Patricia.' Thus the generic term for women amongst older men in Portugal is – 'Marias.'

'Now, let's have a topic,' said Maria-Gloria, scouring the room for hands, which weren't forthcoming.

At last a voice called out, 'Aids.'

'Aids… very good,' she said, scrubbing her hands with enthusiasm, '… now, why are there so many cases of Aids in Africa?' – total silence. 'Come on… come on… think!.. I know you know...' The silence continues until Maria-Gloria resolves to break it. 'Because they have no?.. no?.. no?..'

Faces were now starting to look up startled – they'd been following every word.

Maria-Gloria continued oblivious. 'Come on, they have no?.. no? – by now the classroom was a study of undivided attention. Everybody was waiting for the word which they thought was inevitable – contraceptives.

'Because they have no – I-N-F-O-R-M-A-T-I-O-N!' said Maria-Gloria, with a flourish of her arms.

The pregnant pause which followed, which as pauses go was about as apt as you could get, was of Monty-Pythonesque proportions. I contorted a laugh unravelling somewhere around my face into a kind of perplexed grimace, which must have made me look like the weirdest Englishman students had ever seen.

It was at Gil Vincent that I met Teresa, a Portuguese teacher at the school who taught Art and Design, and with whom I'd established an early quid pro quo – she'd help me improve my bad Portuguese and I'd do the same for her bad English. Though neither of us could have predicted it then, the lessons were to go on for an incredible length of time – perhaps breaking all

known records – since two years later we were married.

Teresa and I exchanged addresses when it was time for me to go back to England. She ripped up my address, she was to confess many years later, seeing me as someone who might not have known the words to, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, but perhaps acted out the screenplay – there are no limits to the flattery of romantic words!

I even managed to stay on in Portugal two weeks after everyone else on the course had left, since having struck up lots of friendships with so many Portuguese, I was reluctant to return. In fact I could have happily stayed out in Portugal like the itinerant TELF teacher I was forever, feeling that if life had taught me anything it was how to stick to a good thing. But as Giovanni's father had reminded me, *'i soldi'* (money) is the primary mover in life, and we all have to bend to *its* course, not our own.

As the TEFL course in Manchester creaked towards its conclusion, which I don't think even the tutors knew how to handle, setting repetitions of what had been amply covered in the first term, my thoughts turned to Giovanni and sleepy *Piedmontese* lanes, and to *La Boca* (the Hole), up in the mountains, and I pondered that perhaps my life had fallen into one by choosing the wrong course.

Then by a wonderful stroke of luck I heard from Giovanni, saying that he was coming to England in May to attend a conference nearby, and would I be interested in meeting up? Would I…?

I picked him up from Piccadilly Station in

Manchester and we toured the sights of the rambling metropolis.

Later, in the 'Eccles Cake Speciality shop', I introduced him to the staff as my Italian friend who'd travelled all the way from Turin – *just to sample Eccles cakes*. With endearing Lancashire gullibility they completely believed me. (We didn't get a free box of Eccles cakes though!)

In the evening we traipsed into Manchester again, and I took him into China Town. We went into a Chinese restaurant but were too early to eat.

'Come back in half an hour,' said the waiter with a smile.

'That's quick!' he said, pop-eyed when we returned after just five minutes – our travels had given us an appetite.

When Giovanni returned to Italy I found myself wishing I was going too. The days till the end of the course thundered by as I engrossed myself in a rigorous schedule of fitness, including swimming, running and wind-surfing.

For the wind-surfing I drove to Manley in Cheshire every Saturday. I'd first tried windsurfing in Greece, and so I still knew the basics, in other words I could stand up for a few seconds. But the icy waters of an artificial lake in Manley only served to remind me of the warm waters of the Aegean and another life beckoning, since even in a wetsuit the frequent dunkings penetrated to the bones, leaving me with a kind of

thermatically-induced drunkenness, which I have to say was not entirely disagreeable.

Cocking a snook at the TEFL course, I booked a *couchette* to Turin and left a week early. I had every reason to be content with myself setting out on a week's holiday that I thoroughly deserved, having just landed a job in Porto.

I'd spotted an ad for a TEFL teacher with interviews in Cambridge and decided to apply. I'd had my interview and passed with flying colours, my somewhat lachrymose description of the manifest beauties of Portugal having swayed matters in my favour, even if it had meant sounding like a Mills & Boone's writer for a while. After that performance Mr. Thompson, the school's co-owner, must have felt he had to give me the job, either that or commission me for a book entitled, *The Romantics Guide To Portugal.*

Not for the first time, I'd pulled all the right levers. This seemed only poetic justice as my feeling on the TEFL course in Manchester was that I'd had my leg pulled.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page 128

CHAPTER 11

Out to Portugal for work with a wizard car alarm

I'd no sooner landed the teaching job in Porto when disaster struck with my Opel Berlinetta – it was stolen.

It had been sitting outside the parents' home looking present enough with its surface resplendently T-Cut (the outcome of some idle Sunday's endeavour) when, as they say in certain parts of Ireland, 'there it was – gone!'

Ludicrous though it now sounds, one of the worst consequences of the Opel's theft were the cassettes I was already beginning to miss – Kenny Rodgers and Gloria Estefan, each track a melodious reminder of a patchwork of Italian recollections.

'I hope the radiator heats over and scalds their face,' said mother, who was not given to curses of mean mechanical intent, it was just that my radiator had recently overheated.

We both inspected the eerily empty driveway in front of the house where the Opel had been the night before, almost as though it would suddenly re-appear like David Hasselhoff's talking car 'Kit' and shout – 'You-who!.. I'm over here!'

I told you to lock it in the garage,' said Father, stern-faced '… that's what garages are for.'

The insurance company was very good in stumping up a couple of grand for the Opel's replacement, and in no time Father had arranged for he and I to go up to a mass drive-through car auction in Leeds. 'Should get a bargain there!' he said confidently.

The vast expanse of motoring merchandise on show in Leeds was a little daunting, a sea of car worthiness – or was it? – since you couldn't test drive any vehicle before you bought it.

'That's the risk,' said Father, whose episode with the Mercedes proved that he liked risks, I just wanted a good car. Trying to gauge a car's worthiness from its outside appearance was like trying to see what a mollusc was up to inside its shell – impossible. You might as well have used water divination to tell how good a buy a car was.

Father kicked the rear shock-absorbers of one car and that it didn't immediately collapse to the ground in a cloud of dust he saw as a good omen, and marked it down as being of interest, while I worked my way down the aisles of automobiles in blind assessment. 'Sight seen' the cars might be, but it wouldn't tell you how they moved, or even if they did.

I've always been hopeless were the insides of cars were concerned. My prowess extends not much beyond changing a tyre and checking the oil. This was proven on my overland drive to Turin three summers previously when a ghostly growl from the engine suggested a problem. I'd stopped and had it looked over at some

sleepy French village where a Gauloises-smoking mechanic, who was clearly envious of my car, thought it a good idea if I went with him on a test drive. I could have strangled him! He must have put his foot down to well over a hundred on those ramrod-straight French highways.

'*C'est bien!,'* (it's fine) he said, when it was over, probably pleased with himself at having given, *'L'Anglais'* (the Englishman) a shock.

'That's supposed to happen,' said Father when I told him about the problem following the mock Monte Carlo run with the Frenchman. '…you see it's got an automatic cooling system that kicks in once the radiator gets too hot' – now he tells me! I was several francs out of pocket, and several strings missing from my bow of nerves.

Before I'd even recognised the car we'd marked down as a possible, minutes later we'd bought it, or rather Father had.

'Oh, hell!' he said.

'What is it now Dad?' I asked.

'That's not the one I wanted,' he said, replacing his pen carefully on to the holder of his clipboard with a pained expression. It turned out he'd mixed up a Ford Cortina with a much better Ford Ghia and got the wrong one – so much for risks!

'It seems alright…' said Father, as we Kangarooed forwards from the first set of traffic lights after the auction. (His Mercedes was an automatic so that would explain the jitters, wouldn't it?) The mix up at the car auction proved fortunate. Father got his mechanic to

look the car over and he said it was a good buy, provided you took one of the rear passenger doors, which needed the strength of a Mr. Universe to open, plus a dodgy tachometer – out of the equation. Still, I had a respectable enough car to go to Portugal in, and one I'd 'won' in an auction, like you might win a bag of crisps at a coconut shy I suppose.

I rang Monica, a Portuguese friend I'd made during my extended teaching trip to Portugal, to tell her the good news.

'Oh, just one thing…' she said as I prepared to pose the receiver, 'what colour is it?'

'White.' I said.

'Oh!' She exclaimed, sounding disappointed.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Oh, nothing… it's just that there are *a lot* of white cars in Portugal.'

'Ah, yes – but not one with a trick door at the back, one which takes more than one person to open,' I should have presciently replied – it pays to have many friends.

'Can you get Y-fronts in Portugal?' Once again Mother was preoccupied by my reckless travels into the dubious frontiers of European undergarments. Had it been a concern with circumspect food I could have understood it, but Mother was the sort of person who wouldn't have batted an eye at eating Sheep's eyes on toast.

'I don't know,' was my weary reply.

With a generosity that would extend to a caravan of nomadic peoples parking themselves on their front lawn

for a whole summer, Peter and Anna, old family friends, invited me to stay with them at just outside Weston-Super-Mare for a few days on my way down to get the Plymouth-Santander ferry that would get me to Portugal.

I'd accrued mountains of bric-a-brac to sustain me in Portugal, like the expensive bayonet-fix desk lamp, which would prove useless in a country where only screw-on light bulbs were available, and a boot filled with columns of cello taped up audio-cassettes, which would also prove mostly useless as my car was broken into just a few weeks later and the radio-cassette player robbed. (On a teacher's wages such replacements were prohibitive.) It was with great reluctance that I left behind my racer bike, not wanting to run the risk this time of passing through some village where a local mechanic might be eager to prove how quickly my *bike* would go, and without me on it!

I was about to set off for Liverpool to buy some impressive-looking luggage to contain all these non-essentials when Father reminded me of an incontrovertible truth –

'The car's your suitcase,' he said. Of course he was right. But if my car was my suitcase, it followed that I had to protect my goods. I decided I needed a form of security that was serious stuff – an anti-theft car alarm.

The Opel Berlinetta had had one but it had been cunningly deactivated, which summed up a major problem with burglar alarms of a type which were hidden (usually somewhere around the car's grill, as the Opel's was) – they could be switched off. The one I decided to

have fitted on my new car was the height of sophistication then – a remote-control, anti-burglar car alarm.

In a decision that was to have momentous repercussions, I bargained down to £150 a mechanic who readily agreed to reading the hieroglyphics of the instructions manual and to set the alarm up on my car. After pointing out the red flashing light to me somewhere in the eaves of the car (this itself should have been a warning), he congratulated me owning a car which, he said, even Al Capone couldn't get into. (What he didn't tell me was that *he* was Al Capone, and standing outside my car!)

'Don't open the windows,' he said, with a cautionary wave of the hand, 'that might set it off.'

The whole arrangement seemed very Heath-Robinsonish, anyway, whoever heard of keeping the windows of a car with no air-conditioning up (as mine was) when driving through the Continent in summer? Yet so pleased was I at the thought of at last thwarting any would-be car thieves, I must have driven off in a spirit of travelling hopefully, even if I hadn't actually started.

When I arrived at Weston-Super-Mare Peter pointed out that I would surely need to open the windows of my car on the Continent with the thermometer creeping up to the eighties – it was mid September – according to the national newspapers he was reading anyway, and Anna agreed. Still, I insisted that I had faith in my new-fangled thief's face-off contraption, after all, I'd had the windows up and down driving down and nothing happened? Peter remained unconvinced.

It was with a feeling of nostalgia that I waved goodbye to Peter and Anna and set off very early the next morning to catch the early boat at Plymouth, which left at 11.am. I was doing Laurie Lee's walking out one mid-summer morning for the umpteenth time – but when would I get it right? This was how I was thinking as I drove away.

For me it was clear, like George Bernard Shaw, I was embarking on a 'search for love,' while for Mother my travels could probably be viewed as an expedition into the darkest recesses of the Y-less frontiers of dubious underpant-wearing Europe.

I'd booked a reclining seat on the ferry since as the voyage was only a 24-hour one it hardly seemed to make sense booking a cabin.

I observed my fellow passengers on the boat, and as always on these occasions, I seem to find myself in earshot of someone saying, 'oh, are we off?' as stationary objects suddenly look as though they're moving, when in fact it's you.

Romantically, as it happened, we chased the sun down over the horizon on that blue September day, which was quite hot, and time passed like an enjoyable sunbathe, which some people, I noticed, unable to wait for Spain, were busily indulging in already on the top deck. An unforgettable moment as, strolling along the aisles of the boat, from the whirling depths below, a swordfish arched out of the sea, not once but twice, eye-balling me with its jet bauble.

In the evening I found my way to the buffet lounge, a broken conversation here and there, and the loneliness

of a little table for one. Even today I still feel a sudden welling isolation in dining alone, which for that reason I almost never do. As if to underline my thoughts, a female singer wearing a sparkling teabag gets into her swing and shrieks out a ballad. I am unable to look at her, perhaps a feeling that you shouldn't show that you are singing for your supper, especially when people are having theirs.

In the back of my mind I am reflecting on the red blinking light in the eaves of the car controlling the anti-theft alarm – should it be doing that? My wandering thoughts are suddenly shattered as this itinerant singer, who I now see is travelling around the tables, lashes out a verse of *Walking Back To Happiness* – right into my ear hole. Does she know something I wonder?

Once disembarked at Santander I observe Father's two-mapped out routes for getting to Porto. (This was long before the days of SatNav.) 'You could go through Burgos.' he'd said. In the end I plump for Valladolid, where I will stay only one night on my otherwise non-stop journey to Porto. I am no sooner a kilometre out from port (I am now thinking in metric), when the evil genius of the jobbing mechanic back in St.Helens becomes apparent, as the blinking red light falls hand in glove with the anti-theft alarm, and a murderously loud banshee of a wail emanates from inside the bonnet of the car.

'What the..!' I find myself shouting out aloud as I frantically wind up the driver-side car window in an effort to get it to stop in the by now scorching mid-

morning heat – and having just let them down for that very reason. I see if that helps, but of course it doesn't, and the blaring continues.

I am just about at my nerve's end when –suddenly – as abruptly as it started, the noise stops. Suspiciously I carry on then, as though bearing out my suspicions, off it goes again. Then seconds later, it stops again. The rule seems to be that more often than not it doesn't sound, but then spasmodically, for no particular reason, it does.

I phone home. Father explains there's nothing to be done from there, but advises that I could always take it to a mechanic, if I was sure it hadn't somehow got damaged on the ferry? – a likely story! I decide not to take it to a mechanic, remembering the Formula One-mad version of that brethren going through France, besides I was expected in Porto. I virtually garland the car bonnet with incense and flower petals, beseeching it to *please* not go off again if it would be so good, but of course soon enough it does – horn blaring like a 'Fire-Bell in the night,' as Jefferson Davis described the commencement of the American Civil war, only it is broad daylight, and there is no civil war in sight.

I head off, lead runner in this odd caravan of the celebration of noise, the antics of the anti-theft alarm usually starting up just as I slip into some sleepy Spanish village, which has its siesta rudely interrupted; on to the next quiet settlement, and the same again, almost as though the mechanic who put the alarm in – whom I am now soundly cursing through clenched teeth –

planted some heat sensor with it to react when passing warm bodies.

'Che passa?' (What's happening?) I hear locals scream out as I pass through their village. They make gestures towards me, which might or might not be rude ones. I feel it would be goading to wave back as I am making so much noise, so don't. Then as quickly as it starts, it stops, irrespective of whether the windows are up or down I've noticed by now, almost as if it's taken on a mind of its own.

While trying to fathom out what to do about my erratic and evilly-intended anti-theft car alarm (which has got me wishing I was more mechanically minded), I stop for what I hope will be a peaceful morning coffee in a well-frequented roadside café.

The locals eye me up with suspicion – perhaps they've heard about the foreigner's screaming caravan of cacophony from relatives further up the road? I look for the toilets inside the café and see two signs above two doorways. One says, *'Señoras'* (Ladies), and the other, *'Caballeros'* (Gentlemen.) – though I do not know this at the time. As my Spanish isn't up to knowing which is which, I am faced with a dilemma – do I choose 'Tweedle Dee' or 'Tweedle Dum?' I look around and the locals seem to understand my predicament, and ease themselves back in their chairs to see which way I jump. They probably have some secret sign language and are taking bets already.

I plunge for the door which says, *'Señoras'* and confidently walk in – gasps follow in my slip stream. Fortunately there is no one inside, otherwise it would

have been me getting the shock, not the locals.

I exit innocently amidst continuing gasps of disbelief, with utterances which this time I *do* recognise, like *'O Senhor!'* (good heavens!) and *'Escandaloso!'* (scandalous.) I leave the café with a heavy conscience, but a light bladder. If they think that's bad I tell myself, they should hear my car alarm going off which – as though it doesn't like me getting all the attention for a change – it does, and I see heads shoot out of the café in amazement as I drive away in my rear view mirror, alarm blaring.

Now approaching the outskirts of Valladolid – the half way point of my journey – and the car alarm being suspiciously quiet for a number of hours (what was it fathoming up?), I was just wondering if I might be able to get to Porto without it going off again, when it does – Drrrrrrrrrrr!

The vast city of Valladolid straight ahead of me and there I am – negotiating one of its more difficult roundabouts, going round in circles, with this blasted car horn going off non-stop, not knowing what to do to disarm it, and probably sounding like the ice-cream man from Hell. (at least the car is an appropriate white.)

People honked and pointed, and presented little tree formations with their outstretched arms, but what could I do? I couldn't stop it!

It must have been in this head-in hands state that I pulled over to the side of the roundabout and a group of around eight youths appeared before me, pointing and making shapes with their hands, as if they were

Red Indians. By now I had the bonnet up and other cars where swirling past, their occupants rubber-necking me, but not stopping. I surveyed under the bonnet, looking as though I was going to do something useful, which of course I wasn't.

'Tirar?' (take out), said a boy of about sixteen, gesturing a wrenching motion with his hands, and pointing to the odious car alarm.

'Si… si…si!,' I said, without thinking and, with one sharp tug of some cables, he had the alarm silenced. *Bliss!* this was my first thought then, 'why the hell couldn't I have thought of that!' my second – by then if he'd asked me if I wanted the engine taking out and replaced by a peddle-car system I'd have agreed with alacrity and peddled all the way to Porto.

'Have a good journey?' asked Paul, the school's co-owner, who'd interviewed me a few weeks earlier in Cambridge, when I finally arrived at the school.

'Not bad,' I said, lying though my teeth, once again remembering my friend Maria-Teresa's dictate about falsehoods and their occasional necessity. Anyway, what would he think of me if I said I'd travelled down half of the Iberian Peninsular sounding like an ear-splitting carnival? No, I would keep that little story of the rogue car alarm, and the even more rogue mechanic who fitted it in St.Helens, quietly to myself thank you very much.

'Glad you're here… though we were only expecting you at the end of September,' said Paul, staring into space.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page 140

CHAPTER 12

Porto and friends faithful and false

Arriving in Porto two weeks earlier than expected hadn't prevented me from getting settled into the 'Learning English Centre's ('LEC' for short) teachers' flat, and more importantly, disgorging the by now semi-packed paraphernalia from my car which constituted Father's mobile suitcase.

If I thought I was organised I was soon to get to know Ollie, the forty-one year old director of LEC's Foz centre (the school had three centres in all), who would soon prove me wrong. I had an early sample of just how hyper-organised Ollie was when he staggered into school one day a week before term commenced, sweating profusely and with a strand of blond hair sticking obstinately from his thinning thatch, as if it didn't want to be there, demanding that books be sorted, 'alphabetically by author', and *not* by title, with almost hysterical urgency, as I and some other teachers, set about the task. Also they were to be stacked, 'vertically' and never, 'horizontally,' because if they were placed in the latter way, he said with a rising crescendo in his voice – like Dr Strangelove straddling the falling bomb

in the film of the same name – this would lead to confusion and, 'a lack of organisation.'

'Nothing like organisation… that's what this school needs… organisation!' said Ollie, as he stomped up and down the school's corridor, as though looking for a dormouse he might organise back into its hole. His jerky movements made him look like a marionette commanded by some equally efficient string-controller high above, one who was having a laugh on we teachers below, swivelling and springing him as his play thing in harmony with the characteristics of the 'economy of movement' – an art learnt by construction workers – which, as though by instinct, Ollie seemed to know. Indeed, Ollie was probably born efficient, popping out exactly to the second, hour and the day that was predicted.

Ollie filled me in on the quirks of the school as he savagely unpacked his bags – as though in a race against the clock – clearly, I thought, here was one of them.

At the first formal teachers' meeting before term began we all got acquainted with those teachers who'd been at LEC more than a year (quite an achievement in itself!), who offered tips as to awkward customers, dodgy books and dodgy places to eat.

I quickly fell in with Pascal, a teacher of German and Dutch at the school who had dual nationality. Pascal like me was thirty. We both enjoyed the same slightly jaundiced view of foreign language teaching as a means of earning a living. Like me Pascal seemed to be doing language teaching until something better came along, and also like me, he didn't seem to know exactly what that something

was. Most remarkable about Pascal on first sight, was the ridiculously small briefcase which he carried about, more like a ladies vanity case than anything else, marking him out, in my eyes at least, as a teacher with foibles –

'Yeah, if I have too much stuff in it… everything's a mess and I can't find anything,' he said one day, explaining away its tiny size. Pascal was also more than a little circumspect about the school's two owners, Paul and Kevin. 'For sure they don't like that I work for two schools,' he confided to me one day. In fact Pascal worked for three places since he also did some classes at Porto University's Arts Faculty.

Pascal was by turns fascinated and amused by my turning up for classes in a tie.

'Okay, if I had to give classes wearing a tie it would be a problem.' he said to me one day, fingering the fringe of his turtle-neck jumper, of which he had an endless colourful supply.

Being from Utrecht he was extraordinarily proud of the Treaty of Utrecht, about which, being good at history, I was able to get one over on him one day by reminding him of its date – 1713, which he couldn't remember and which – whether being Continental or not I shall never know – he did not seem to regard as relevant.

'You English are obsessed with dates, but we Dutch established the rules of Europe with Utrecht!' he would boast to anyone who would lend an ear. Ollie, Pascal regarded with a mariner's wonder for some strange basking sea creature, a manatees perhaps, which, if only for its connotations of taking things easy, Ollie most definitely was not.

Like Mr. Donks, Pascal 'suffered' from sibilance – 'Keith stayed in the flat with Dawson…' (Ollie's surname) '… lasssh-t year…,' said Pascal, '… and by the end of the year he was-sh really hating this guy…'

The warning did not bode well, and I was already noticing that Ollie had taken it upon himself to organise my things in the teachers' flat in the *Rua Rodriques de Freitas* – even in my bedroom!

'He's doing *what*!' said Pascal, rolling back in his chair and laughing when I told him, mainly I think because the things being organised weren't his. 'No, really… organising your stuff… that really *stings*…' he said – pronouncing 'stinks' as 'stings' – unless that's what he really wanted to say.

It was not only with objects that Ollie saw fit to configure his and your universe in perfect harmony, as in some grand comic vision he had going on in his head, he also had an obsession with time, since as any organiser will tell you, organisation has repercussions on time. This was a man who placed his wristwatch in front of himself at teachers' meetings, and regularly checked it with all the enthusiasm of an ornithologist watching birds.

The first inkling I had that Ollie's illness – which his obsession with organisation surely at least bordered upon – was not restricted to the tactile was when I got up in the morning. I've been fortunate in always being able to get up at the time I wanted by repeating that time to myself umpteen times in my head before going to sleep. At *Rua Rodriques de Freitas* no sooner would I fling off the bed sheets to get up when a noise, almost

like a ruffle's echo, would come from Ollie's room next door – he was getting up too.

When I mentioned this strange phenomenon to Pascal he just laughed uproariously – 'You can't get up before him… he's the director!' he said.

Pascal's landlady was a woman dwarf of around sixty. I'd been round to his comfortable-looking house off the *Rua de Constitução* on a number of occasions, where I'd been introduced to Dona Maria-Odette, his landlady.

Maria-Odette was a spinster who had a little group of friends, all of about the same age, and they all loved Pascal. They even played cards together at weekends. Maria-Odette was polite and treated her lodger like a live-in prince, bowing venally to him, and almost toppling over in doing so, since I don't think her physical condition lent itself to such manoeuvres. Pascal just laughed. I soon found myself envying what I saw as Pascal's idyllic lifestyle, waited on hand and foot by his ever-fussing dwarf landlady.

Fern, another teacher at the school, was pale and venerable-looking, and had come form a Comprehensive school in Kent. She was designated LEC's 'Assistant Director of Studies' – a more or less empty role it soon transpired, which basically involved seeing that Ollie didn't derail the other teachers into mental collapse with his hankering after efficiency. Fern's main weakness was her hanger-on boyfriend, Frankie, a jobbing mechanic by trade who'd long ago given up the tinkering of spanners and now lived unashamedly off Fern, with whom he shared a flat somewhere around Porto.

Frankie was from Glasgow and regarded the rest of we teachers with a sort of envious contempt, as though he didn't covet our jobs, but did our wage packets. He'd spring to life at the end of the month when everyone got paid – except him of course – boasting some sop of an acquisition like a gold lapel badge or a new overcoat that Fern had seen fit to treat him with, mainly one suspected to keep his Glaswegian temper that was apt to erupt from time to time in check. That it erupted everyone knew, as when one day Fern turned up to a teachers' meeting with a black eye, and it wasn't too difficult to guess who the culprit was. She'd 'walked into a door,' that was Fern's lame excuse – she'd certainly walked into a door with Frankie.

In the insane workings of love and romance, Fern said it was Frankie she had to thank for her sanity, which was a strange take on sanity some might say. Eventually Kevin banned Frankie from entering the school, and it was quite a relief when his corrosive Glaswegian accent, which swept everything up in its path as its target, was no longer heard around the school.

Such was the drag of the social net in small teaching circles around Porto that scandal about people, or just plain rumours, were always surfacing. There was the story about how Phillipa, another teacher in her mid-twenties, had had a gun pulled on her by an older student she was rash enough to date, or the one about Carl, from LEC's rival school, 'English Everywhere,' who was supposed to be having a torrid affair with one of LEC's secretaries, and so compromising the latter's

business information, in the TEFL world's equivalent of the Profumo Affair.

Frankie, being an outsider to teachers' circles, didn't escape the casting of the gossip net by others. Indeed, partly because he was so, he became the target of it. He was often to be bumped into drunk (him, not you), in the city's *'Ribeira'* (riverside) district, popular with foreigners and dipsomaniacs like Frankie because of its profusion of cheap open-all-hours bars, wandering about alone. The fact that Fern was never with him seemed to be an indictment of the sort of person he was. One story concerning Frankie is a classic cautionary tale of taking people at face value.

After some pestering from Fern, Pascal had finally managed to get Frankie six hours teaching at the university where he worked, even though Frankie was a mechanic with no formal qualifications.

One evening in the Café Ceuta, just off the main *Avenida dos Alliados* Frankie was boasting about his new university job, and of how he'd used the readers' pages of Playboy Magazine as the subject matter for one of his classes – whether he'd been stupid enough to reveal the source was not mentioned, but it lead to gasps of incredulity. I was not surprised when I found out some weeks later that his classes had been reduced from six to three.

One of the reasons I'd got the job at LEC was that I had a car, which meant that I was as much teaching English around firms in Porto as I was in the school's main centre in the *Rua Santa Caterina* in the city centre.

It didn't take me long to work out that I was being taken advantage of as I'd be picking up 8.30 am start

classes at Deutsche Bank, and rounding off the day with a 9 pm class back at the school's main centre two days of the week. The petrol allowance I'd been promised for my car was also startlingly derisory. What was worse, I was working Saturdays on an 'on-off' basis at one of the school's centres. This meant that you'd just be getting used to Saturdays off, when they were taken away from you again. For somebody who loved the freedom of Saturdays as I did, this was almost tantamount to a prison sentence. But still, being back in Porto as I'd determined I would be, and picking up where I'd left off with the friends I'd made earlier in the year on the Manchester course, was brilliant beyond bounds.

Through Monica I got to know a network of friends that seemed to unfold like a never-ending paper streamer, only I was to find out soon enough that the intrinsic value of those friendships was of a similar material.

'I think they're using you,' said Caroline to me one day – Caroline was a small and pretty teacher at the school.

'Who?.. my Portuguese friends? Impossible!' I said, somewhat hurt to think that anybody could think I was being used.

'They're only interested in your car, and where you can take them at the weekends with it… you'll see.'

Caroline was a teacher who'd lived most of her life in Canada, and had Portuguese parents. When she wasn't casting aspersions on my friendships I got on really well with Caroline since her sense of humour seemed to match mine. She was a popular teacher, and

being fluent in Portuguese, could quickly tune into any subversive talk in class, an ability I've found – as my Portuguese has improved – a positive disadvantage since it only encourages you to react to things and loose your temper where otherwise you'd just ignore it. She once told me that she was nearly killed by a maraudering black bear in Canada when she was a toddler, having inconspicuously crawled away from her parents whilst the family were on a picnic.

'Oh, you don't believe that, do you?' hooted Cerys, a constantly-laughing Welsh teacher at the school, not long out of university. I furrowed my brow. 'That's Caroline's tumour… she's always making things up… she's a compulsive liar is Caroline,' said Cerys, combing back her blonde hair in comic relief. It turned out that Caroline had a brain tumour that, to Cerys at least, made her come out with these far-fetched stories. That Caroline's tumour existed seemed to be in evidence as I'd asked her why she'd suddenly given up the fitness club I'd joined – in fact the one she'd introduced me to – and she'd clammed up. Cerys told me that the management had explained to Caroline that it would be bad for business if word got round that one of their members had a brain tumour. (What they probably meant was if one dropped dead on the parallel bars!) 'It's not doing anything…'Cerys went on. 'It's benign… it just means she can't do certain things.'

I continued to treat Caroline in the same way as ever, only from then on astutely avoiding any conversation which touched on brains. The only problem was that thereafter I found myself doubting everything Caroline

said. Was it her speaking, I wondered, or the tumour? I even asked myself if Caroline had hoodwinked Cerys, and if the whole matter of the brain tumour was an elaborate lie, perpetrated by Caroline herself, a little in-war between women? It might be worth giving up membership of a fitness club for such a crafty ruse. It was something I never got to find out.

At this time my social life with my car-loving friends who, according to Caroline saw me as little more than their glorified chauffeur, showed no signs of abating. We were off somewhere or other every weekend, and always rounding off with the Saturday night disco in Povoa de Varzim, a small coastal town a short drive up the coast from Porto.

In the afternoon before the disco, which we'd wait for, we'd spend hours in the circular, 'Diana Bar,' an odd café, like a beached and bleached life belt, sitting high up on the shore line with fantastic views out over the ocean – chatting, telling stories, and watching the sun set on the horizon, whose disappearance would mark the imminent onset of the disco.

Not that I've ever liked discos. They were the empty hours in a friendship for me, but ones that had to be got through if you wanted to be a member of the club.

'Your friends still using you Mr. Chauffeur?' – it was Caroline, taunting me again about my fair-weather friends as she saw them. 'If you didn't have that car you'd see how much they were your friends,' she said, looking certain in her beliefs.

As it happened the test case was not far off. In a decision I will always regret that Christmas, when I could

have gone home, been enjoying myself with family and friends back in England, I decided instead not to, and to stay in Porto. Surely I'd have endless places to visit with my merry band of Portuguese friends wouldn't I?

How wrong I was! What a washout Christmas and New Year was that Year! I spent most of the two weeks sketching and reading.

As Caroline had predicted, it was business as usual once the holidays were over, but by then my attitude to a group of friends I saw as charlatans had set as hard as the icing of the Christmas cake back home that I'd missed. When I suddenly started withdrawing my offers of lifts, Caroline's assessment of the ulterior motives in my 'friends' friendship bore true, and thankfully they drifted away like the sea mists that they had now become to me.

Not unexpectedly as this was happening my friendship with Caroline grew, although that's all it was since she said (as if she could be believed!) that she had a boyfriend back in Toronto and so, somewhat disingenuously, I made out that I too was still beaten and bruised from Rachel in Turin which, perhaps in part, was even then true.

One day Caroline took me to choose some shoes in Porto's busy 'Brasilia Shopping' centre, now relegated to a sleepy backwater with the growth of other shopping centres of late, where I found myself ordering two pairs of shoes.

'Oh, they remember you in that shop!' said Caroline to me one day at the school as I told her I'd had to raise my voice to the management there because my order never seemed to materialise – it was an early experience

of Portuguese delaying tactics (if not desertion tactics) which is just as frustrating as its better known Spanish counterpart of, *'mañana'*

When Caroline's friendship – which is all it ever was – really came to my rescue was when matters passed boiling point with Ollie in the teachers' flat.

First of all, the flat had never been the teachers,' since it was open house to any passing carnival of the weird and wonderful that my flatmate deemed fit to invite in. In my case I preferred to leave the colour in my life outside, Ollie preferred to bring it in. He was an avid fencing enthusiast and regularly disappeared at weekends (sweet relief!) to adjudicate in some fencing tournament or other in Lisbon. At the time matters came to a head, he was busy training a group of *Capoeira* dancers to become fencers. (*Capoeira* is a dance of Brazilian origin which basically involves two partners smashing stout wooden sticks at each other and then moving around.) This was good for the reflexes apparently, hence the tie in with fencing.

They'd been training in the living room of all places, which didn't lend itself to swinging a budgerigar around in a cage, and not surprisingly smashed a side lamp which then had to be glued back together.

'Capoeira's excellent for eye-hand co-ordination,' blurted out Ollie, as I sneaked into the kitchen to grab a coffee, then escape back into my bedroom. I'd have gone out only it was after midnight.

'I'll ask Dona Amelia if she can help,' said Caroline at the school, realising that I was desperate to get out of

the teachers' flat. Dona Amelia was Caroline's landlady who, if it was to be believed, had an extensive network of friends around Porto who also rented out.

When I had some free time I duly turned up at the house where Caroline lodged with Dona Amelia, a fragile lady well into her eighties. She greeted me cautiously, after which she reached for the phone to ring up some of her illustrious friends.

Ten minutes later she returned to the living room where I was waiting with Caroline, cross-handed, as though for a dental appointment, to receive what Dona Amelia had discovered. She cleared her throat before speaking –

'I spoke to Dona Rosa, who said she didn't have anything… she spoke to Dona Beatrice, who also said she didn't have anything… I then spoke to Dona Lourdes, who said she didn't have anything… wasn't expecting to take anybody in any time soon, and didn't know anybody who was…' Sometimes disappointments can be luridly fascinating when they're so comprehensive.

Back in the flat the final straw was reached when I found my clothes stacked in the centre of my bed, not for the first time, in a perfect pyramid – larger items at the bottom, diminishing incrementally to smaller ones at the top.

'In that case I feel sorry for Ollie,' said Cerys, crease-faced, when I finally told her I'd left the teachers' flat, and who couldn't understand why I was moving out of it. I didn't see why she thought like that since Ollie hadn't lost a penny by the upheaval, whereas I was

losing money hand over fist by staying in expensive hotels until I found somewhere else to live. Besides, now Ollie had more empty space to organise.

I told Kevin and Paul, who seemed to take it well. Of course I was free *not* to stay in the school flat if I wished they assured me, though I knew that they couldn't have liked it since they were now paying for my part of the rent, and so perhaps making less from their teachers?

'Well Ollie can tell them that when he's their teacher next year,' chipped in Kevin, referring to students soon after I'd moved out of the school flat – meaning that I wouldn't be. Kevin had a special gift for letting you know when he was displeased.

As it happened I was pleased to be moving on from LEC, and was later in the year to get a much better contract with another school in Porto where I worked happily for many years. Sometimes, if you're lucky, situations will right themselves without seemingly much work from you. I'd gone along to 'the Bath School' for an interview in June only to find, who else was applying for the job? – none other than Frankie. Needless to say, it was not Frankie that got the job but me.

My overnight abandonment of the LEC flat had precipitated a crisis for me and got tongues wagging at the school.

'Is Bill leaving?' I could read it on people's lips. But I wasn't going to let an organisation-crazed, rapier-wielding maniac divert me from my chosen path. I

simply had to get alternative accommodation, and soon.

I scoured the daily newspapers for 'To Let' columns, knowing that I couldn't afford the high costs of hotel accommodation in the city for long which, needless to say, the school wasn't covering.

By great luck I spotted a room to share, rang up and the soundings on the other end of the line were encouraging. This was Raul and Fernanda Lopes, a lovely couple I was to spend four enjoyable months with up to the summer in their high-rise, tenth floor flat, with fantastic views out over the Atlantic Ocean.

The Lopes' were both in their sixties. Raul had been born in British India, 'Darjeeling,' he said, proudly, while Fernanda hailed from somewhere in the interior of Portugal. Like the Castellano's in Turin, they took me in almost as a son, and saw to it, with frequent enquiries to allay any fears that I might have, that I was comfortable.

They kept me entertained with stories of when they'd lived in Angola (Portuguese West Africa) before, and even during, the years of colonial disturbance – of how Raul had driven from Luanda to Quirimbo, a distance of two hundred kilometres, just, he said, to take a coffee! Another day there was a tale of a band in full gold-braided splendour, marching and playing in honour of the famous Portuguese General Spinola in a town called Sa Da Bandeira. That day had been so hot, said Raul, that the Portuguese National Anthem became increasingly unrecognisable, as band members either fainted from the heat or – in the case of the woodwind section – had their throats dried up by the burning air. Excitedly, they showed me a photograph of the pilot

who'd flown them back to Portugal in 1975 on Angloa's independence – a diminutive Latin-looking John Cleese with obligatory handle-bar moustache.

Their lives had been lived out inside the kaleidoscope of the dying days of Europe in Africa and now they were retired, living off savings and what they could scrap with me, the wandering English teacher who, it seemed, ended up everywhere – propelled along into the sea of what life had to offer as if by a wave, not so much making his own destiny, as being pushed into one – Olban, my alter-ego, would have understood that.

'Ah, you remind me of St. Peter,' said Raul as I showed up one day shuffling a bunch of keys (I had so many different places to teach at with LEC I was weighed down by keys!) '… with the keys to the Pearly Gates.'

Raul was fond of jokes, and for this reason we got along great. He loved the one about the monkey that had won First Prize in a painting competition in Portugal, which was a true story – a satisfying debunk to the Art world and all its pretence.

Fernanda was also a mine of amusing tales. She once told me that she'd woken up every morning with a headache in Africa because of the strong African sun – and that was for fourteen years!

Sometimes I'd come back from teaching and Raul would be tapping away on his typewriter in his dressing gown. I imagine that he was writing his memoirs, which must have been fascinating, but I shall never know since obviously I didn't ask him what he was up to.

My days with the Lopes' came to an end when I met

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:30 Page 156

Teresa, by sheer chance as I had to get some money from the Cashpoint in Matosinhos, and I bumped into her in the street.

'What are you doing here?' she said, amazed, not knowing I'd managed to get back to Porto. I asked her if she wanted a drink, she accepted, and we reminisced about the time I was doing my training at her school, which although only a year ago, seemed like ages.

'We must go out for a meal?' which offer, much to my relief, she readily accepted. It must have been a successful night out because by the end of the next year we were married.

CHAPTER 13

Life in Porto, sliding down the learning curve

I was now a married Englishman in my early thirties living in Portugal. As Ian, a newly arrived teacher at the Bath School joked to me one day, I had 'gone native!' He shouldn't wonder if I'd be banishing fish and chips next he said when I told him that we ate mainly Mediterranean food in our household, with Teresa being Portuguese, and that chips were a rarity.

'*Chips four times a year*!' pipes up Al, taking his eyes off his lesson plan momentarily, 'you might as well live off astronauts' tablets.'

One of Al's major disenchantments with Porto was the lack of fish and chip shops, which he called 'chippies,' and while he managed to find, like rare truffles, some small *'tascas'* (food-serving bars) in the centre of town which served him up with a plate of chips, he was forever grumbling. 'No chips in this place!' was a common cry from Al. Even when he did find a suitable place, he complained that he didn't like having a dollop of rice spooned on to his plate alongside the chips, which is common in Portugal.

This phenomenon probably dates back to a

showdown between the Duke of Wellington, who was over in Portugal in the early 1800's to drive Napoleon's men out, and descendents of Genghis Khan from the east, who decided that chips should always be served next to rice when in Portugal. At least that's the suggestion I put to Al one day, and he grunts approval, as though that's all very well but it didn't help him with sourcing chips – and *only* chips.

'Ah, but did chips exist in Wellington's day?' says Ian, suddenly enthusiastic and rapidly flipping through the pages of a hefty dictionary held in the crook of his arm.

'Has anybody seen the post-its?' asks Lynn, who is forever searching for them.

'Chips… chipper… CHEERful-looking,' says Ian absorbed. He suddenly brings the dictionary down to waist level and looks ahead starry-eyed, 'Ah, chippy!'

'What?' says Al, craning his neck at Ian's open dictionary. He is now taking an interest in a subject close to his heart.

'Chippy… it's a slang word for carpenter,' says Ian closing his dictionary triumphally.

'Ah, but that's to do with *wood* chips though isn't it?' says Al, rocking back in a chair which isn't a rocking chair though he's made it into one. '…I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree there mate,' he says, now twisting a biro in his mouth.

'Now there's an interesting word says Ian, burying his head once more in the dictionary, '*bark*.' A few seconds later his head goes up –

'Bark… barking… BARKER… an animal or person that barks.'

'Now you've gone barking mad,' says Al, letting out a loud explosion of air from his cheeks, which is his way of gearing up for classes, which is strange because it's most people's way of winding down after them. But then Al is anything but conventional, having his own distinct view of the world.

Al had a girlfriend called Tessa who shared a flat with him near the school. Tessa also gave classes at the Bath School though her main school was elsewhere. These two were forever arguing. Inevitably it would be over something trivial, like mislaid cassettes or a cassette player, or even a paper clip, they didn't need much to attach anger to their conversations.

The present topic of conversation was quite apt since Al and Tessa could quite easily rip each other apart over a subject as banal as fish and chips.

'I'll be glad when I'm doing VSO,' (Voluntary Service Overseas) 'next year in Bhutan,' says Tessa unexpectedly as she gives Al stormy-weather looks with her eyes, clearly something is brewing.

'Hey, what's bugging Al?' says Ian, picking up on Al's broody demeanour.

'It doesn't take much to spark Al's tinder,' says Tessa answering him, and taking a book from the shelves.

'Now that's an interesting word,' says Ian, hurrying through the pages of the dictionary once more. '*Tinder*… I wonder what the origins of tinder are?'

Ian is the only TEFL teacher I've known, before or since, who relished a dictionary as a leisure pursuit, or as he put it himself, as 'a bit of light reading.'

Far from the world of schools and wonky English

speaking, my world was now filled with nappies, trips to the supermarket and any manner of chores befalling the recently first-time-turned father as I now was with the arrival of Sara in 1993. Then followed Sophie in 1997. The consultation of the Mothercare Manual was almost daily – it's interesting how you can't refer toddlers and babies to the small print in books on how they're supposed to behave! It was like in the TEFL world where children would give out to you a perfect sunny smile when trying to teach them, and when they hadn't understood you one jot.

'No, general is *above* major in the army Fernando.' – I was explaining the ranks in the army to a student who'd asked.

'But really,' says Fernando, 'that's not so.'

'It most s certainly *is* so Fernando, I assure you,' I say.

'In that case why is Major over General?'

'He's not!' I insist.

'But John Major is your Prime Minister,' he says, with a sort of serves-you-right smile beaming all over his face. This was about the time of the first Gulf war.

This is an example of the kind of booby traps students will gladly have you fall into, not through not knowing the language, but knowing it too well. And you must smile, pat them on the head – but not too heavy-handedly – and crow, '… well done Fernando!.. well done!'

Another student I had at the Bath School declared one day that she didn't like, 'Margaret Teacher.' Simple

word order problem I think to myself as I hurry to her side. 'No, that's incorrect,' I tell her.

I'm wondering how to make this politic, and also how odd it is that I haven't yet met this new teacher who's called Margaret. 'No it's… *I don't like Margaret who's the teacher*… if you must say that,' I add a little disapprovingly.

Still, she insists she is saying the sentence perfectly correctly. In the end it turns out what she wants to say is – 'I don't like Margaret Thatcher.'

In my second year at the the Bath School I'm not surprised to hear that Al and Tessa have separated. He's got a job in South Korea and she's teaching VSO, not in Bhutan, but in Benin. It is just another of the many casualties with which TEFL is littered as young people, fresh out of college, or discontented with their first job, seek to find themselves in the world and, sometimes, perhaps by accident, leave broken hearts behind them in doing so.

I hear a year later from Al that he's had a horrendous motor cycle accident in South Korea and is lucky to be alive. Of Tessa nor Al nor anybody else ever hears anything ever again.

When Annie arrives in the new term as the new teacher from Stourbridge, partly replacing Tessa, nobody freezes her out, even though by now I, Lynn and Ian are quite a tightly-knit group of old hands.

'You're all being exploited!' declares Annie, letting drop the pile of course books from the class where she's

just been teaching that crash loudly on to the low glass coffee table.

'Why do you think that?' says Ian, wearing a wronged look on his face, that suggests that somebody is misusing the English Language to him.

'Because you are! You shouldn't have to do those talks,' she says, sliding her eyes along to Gabby next to her, as though looking for affirmation. Gabby is also a new teacher.

'Yeah, talks aren't in the contract,' says Gabby, getting fully behind Annie.

'Haven't you read it?' asks Annie.

The rest of us stare blankly at each other – we didn't think we had.

'It doesn't say anything about giving talks here,' says Annie, waving a photocopy of her contract in the air like Emily Pankhurst.

An eerie quiet falls around the teachers' room.

Annie, despite being a new face around the school – and so arguably the least qualified to raise such a sensitive subject – is in fact absolutely right. We do not have to do any talks according to our year-long contracts, which is renewable if we're lucky.

These talks could be undertaken individually or with another teacher and were for the benefit of local Portuguese teachers of English whose schools, not surprisingly, supplied the bulk of the students to the Bath School. It was therefore a naked example of PR – though not in the contract. Harry Archer, the England-based director of the Bath School (there were several around Portugal) often flew out to sit in on these talks,

and presumably if he didn't like them you'd get to know, although nobody could think of a case of that ever happening.

'Talks are really easy,' explained Ewan, Harry's stand-in director in Portugal, or 'Sleeping' Director, as you might call him, since most Saturday mornings, while we were busy teaching he was in the land of Nod. '… and the teachers love them!' enthused Ewan. He was of course referring to the Portuguese teachers of English, who had nothing to do with the school, but perhaps secretly was hoping we'd include ourselves in that category.

Before any of we old hands knew what was happening, Annie and Gabby had set us in an unholy alliance against the school's directors, so much so that at one point we feared for our jobs.

'I'm going to ask Ewan if he's going to sack me,' said Ian, marching into Ewan's office courageously one day.

'What did he say?' we all wanted to know as Ian emerged from the director's room minutes later with a huge intake of breath.

'He's not going to sack us!'

'PHEW!' – a collective sigh of relief emanates around the teachers room.

'Though I wouldn't like to be in Annie or Gabby's shoes right now,' says Ian, 'not a bit.'

It was not long before Annie and Gabby did indeed leave, Annie returning to England where she'd taught in primary school, and Gabby having to wait another year to see if she could get back on to teacher training

which, ironically, she'd ditched to come to Portugal.

The upshot of the Annie and Gabby forago was that I began to realise that in the TEFL world two, or even three, jobs were better than one, and just like a knight was more protected by more armour, so in TEFL you were protected by more jobs. I duly began applying for other schools, starting with those that recruited Saturday teachers, as I thought they'd be easiest.

One school sticks clearly in my mind. It was high up, occupying a whole floor of an office block and with panoramic views to the river Douro below. Nice views I thought, I wondered if the school matched up.

I was asked to wait in the corridor outside for a moment by the mop of a head protruding momentarily from some double doors, speaking in Portuguese.

'Please sit down,' said the smiling figure before me, a middle-aged woman in neatly-pressed overalls, who by now I had clocked was none other than the cleaner.

'I really think I should…' I was going to say, '… wait until the manager is around,' but she was having none of it. She posed her bucket and mop and, excitedly running to the table, gestured for me to sit down.

'Now she said,' with a big broad smile '… you've come about classes… can I see your cv?'

I wearily handed her my cv from my attaché case, wishing I was somewhere else, and cussing my English reserve, which held me back from walking out on the spot.

'Hm,' she exclaimed, perusing the papers in her hand as though they were from Mars. 'Of course you can't just show up and teach you know?.. you need to be qualified,' she said, clasping her hands decisively, a

gesture she'd probably seen performed umpteen times by the director and now wished to emulate.

'Well if that's all?.. I said, by now standing up, and no longer wishing to be complicit in her little game of make-believe, 'Good Bye.' She smiled and waved me to the door.

Going back on the train I was livid, although back home with Teresa, a shared bottle of wine cast that little theatre of the absurd into a kinder light – humanity, always trying to better itself! (Needless to say I never heard from the school, and I have often wondered since – *was* she the director?)

In the June, to Annie and Gabby's night of the long knives of the March, I got a very positive lead for a job. It was a large, well-known multinational English school, having many centres up and down Europe called, 'English Avenue.'

English Avenue was centrally administered with a top-down structure. As the director of one of its centres explained to me, the company 'didn't give classes,' but offered a 'lifestyle.' Since I was intent on improving my own lifestyle at the time – particularly monetarily – I was prepared to put up with any claptrap just to get a job. I nodded enthusiastically, keeping any misgivings I had safely locked away in the Annie-and-Gabby funeral casket of how *not* to behave in front of a potential employer.

I was pleased when a day's interview was arranged for me to visit Lisbon, and only slightly less pleased when it happened to clash with a visit from Mother and Father, who were keen to see (then) there only

granddaughter in our small apartment. (I suppose also in mother's case it was to replenish my all-essential stock of Y-fronts which, as it happens, are impossible to find in Portugal, or anywhere else but the UK I think.)

So Mother, Father, Baby and Teresa were left behind in the apartment in Porto while I set off, sweating and apprehensive, to be picked up by Mr. Rogel in his flashy BMW at some corner café.

I sped down the motorway to Lisbon with Mr. Rogel talking all the time about himself. Normally most employers got to know their prospective employees, but in Mr. Rogel's case it seemed he was only interested in placing on exhibition the vast toy fort of his life, and I gathered from how he spoke that he was something of a playboy, using words like 'casinos' and 'yachts.'

'I've also a house in Cascais,' (a rich area in Portugal), he said. This was shortly after telling me about his mountain retreat in,*'Tras-Os-Montes'* (literally, 'Behind-The-Mountains') in the north – here was a guy who was seriously rich I thought, or at least wanted to project that image.

That entire journey down to Lisbon was like an object lesson in a mentality fixated on luxury and wealth, just as the car journey to France with the Gauloises-smoking mechanic had been an object lesson in keeping hold of your seat tightly.

As though thought begot action, Mr. Rogel seemed to put his foot further down on the accelerator, and soon we were flying through great swathes of land, just as he went flying through the greatest adventures of his life, which he seemed eager to recount. His standard of

English, especially for a director of an English school, was at least risible and at worst slanderous, as he insulted the Oxford English Dictionary with the poverty of his dullard's selection of its great wealth. He was not an individual you'd like to be alone with in a room, or a car, discussing any subject under the sun, not even the gratuitous use of swear words, of which he was clearly a Grand Master.

By now I'd decided I didn't want to work for English Avenue, whatever the outcome of the interview in Lisbon – if he was representative of the sort of people who worked for them. But by then we were hurtling southbound, well over speed limits, and with no way of turning around.

After being shown round the Lisbon centre of English Avenue I was taken to lunch by that school's director, a Mr. Oliveira who, slapped Rogel on the back jocosely, this gesture made me think that the two were as thick as thieves – if not other things.

'He says… I'll be a millionaire next year…,' said Rogel, referring to Oliveira, 'but I said, wait, not so fast,' confided Rogel to me as the other guy went to the toilets. He was slackening with the obscenities I noticed, perhaps the blocking of his mouth with food had something to do with it.

On the way back to Porto his appreciation for swearing was refreshed, and he soon slipped back into bad language. Though I didn't tell him of my disapproval of his language – rich for someone running a language school – I at least told him what I thought of his driving, which I called 'reckless,' – and that was letting him off

lightly.

Needless to say there was another job opportunity bad-mouthed into non-existence, though not by me.

At the time that I was busy looking for a fall-back job to act as a safety net for what I was seeing as the increasingly fast and loose antics of the Bath School, I managed to get in with a group of teachers through the British Council's *Rua de Breiner* centre, slightly off the beaten track in Porto. Here, twice a year, the Cambridge Exams were held, bringing together teachers from all over the Porto area, and indeed beyond. By the end of the Nineties I'd established quite a wide circle of friends and acquaintances there.

The Cambridge Examinations for foreigners in English were like the Holy Grail of English learning. Passing one of their exams was a definite plus, even allowing at the higher levels for a student to study at a British university. For this reason the administration of these exams had to be just so.

To the TEFL teachers who did the Cambridge exams, those who were lucky enough to get on them, it was like a Scout's Jamboree, with the candidates, or students, doing all the peg laying-out. All that you had to do as an examiner was to ask pre-set questions for the Oral (the written papers were all sent back to Cambridge), that and oversee the listening component, the latter involving all sorts of Machiavellian techniques such as knowing when to stop and start an audio cassette player.

Inevitably, especially at the higher levels, you'd be

drawn into conversation with students, so, far from being a gauge of candidates' English, you could end up being interviewed yourself by students if you were not careful, in which case it would become a gauge of yours!

This is why branching out into conversations was greatly discouraged on the examiner's part by Cambridge, although could not be entirely prevented, leading sometimes to embarrassing situations of almost Kafkaesque proportions. This was evident in the way that you could not let the candidate know how they'd done in the exam.

'So… how did I do?' – a most natural question for a candidate to ask, might receive –

'Thank you… you may go now.'

This made it look like you, far from being an exponent of natural English speaking, were in fact a robot with a chip in his or her head, somehow landed through the roof of the examining centre, dropped in by parachute.

Eventually the powers that be tried to smooth over this obvious drawback by asking you to say something like – 'I can't tell you that… the exam is over… thank you.'

Yet even this sounds like the voiceover to an escalator warning ('*Please mind the steps*!... *please mind the steps*!), and anyway only encouraged the more determined to persist. It also didn't make allowances for the very natural human inclination to say, 'very good,' at the end of an interview, whatever the candidate's performance was.

This especially caused problems with weaker

students who could barely string two sentences together in English – 'But… but the examiner … he say I do very good?' they might explain at length. The natural tendency to say 'very good' at the end of interviews was almost as tricky to avoid as those games where you're asked a question and can't say 'yes' or 'no' in the answer – nigh-on impossible!

Because of problems like these we examiners were 'standardized,' so that everybody could be seen to be pulling on the same invisible line (once again with overtones of robotics.)

'Have you been standardized?' asked Cynthia Beautee to one late-comer to an examiners' meeting one day.

'No,' replied Tom, a Liverpudlian, 'but they tell me it's very painful.'

Tom was a newly-arrived teacher to Porto who was not universally liked for his verbal mischief-making – like now. People speculated about how Cynthia came to have such a bizarre surname, but nobody came up with a satisfactory answer.

Cynthia Beautee leads the meeting with an air of electrifying concentration. She closes her eyes, strains her face, as though racked with pain, and oscillates her hands gently around her head, as though performing some ancient ritualistic chant.

'We've got videos… CD's…and oh!..' She strains again to see if she can remember what it is that they've got. '… floppy ROMS…'

A loud shriek rents the air. It is Hilary, another

English teacher from Porto who, whether through professional rivalry or a sense of mischief, can't seem to help laughing at Cynthia.

I often bump into Hilary on my way to teach my pharmaceutical products salesmen on Porto's endlessly long *Rua de Constituição* with her eleven-year old daughter Alison. I like to grumble to her about my students, who seem aloof.

I ask them if they think the English they're learning is useful for reading pharmaceutical boxes, or following the instructions inside them and, in a response unexpected in its candour, they tell me that it isn't. I consider giving them a class on social skills, beginning with passing on compliments to people about their work, and saying how useful it's been to you – even if it isn't true, and you haven't got a clue what they're on about.

'Can we go now please?' says Alison before I've even got into my stride. Clearly Alison thinks I am a weird person to be hurried away from as quickly as possible – oh, to see ourselves as others see us!

'Now,' says Cynthia, drawing attention to herself once more by beginning her strange trance with the weird hand movements, 'if you want to get more information you can go to…oh…' – she pauses, her brow so taught in concentration it looks as though it could crack a walnut, and, as she's concentrating so much, beginning to resemble one.

'Oh, w… dot… dot… dot...'

Hilary lets out another scream and Charles stands up, apologizing for the interruption and telling people that they can find more information about what Cynthia's referring to in their information packs. Cynthia resumes with perfect poise.

Charles is a British Council teacher who brings a breath of fresh air to the otherwise rather stuffy corridors of the place. He too like Cynthia gives pep talks on how you should standardly proceed in the Cambridge exams, but is very wooden in his presentations. One example being how he choreographs his hand fall to the backs of chairs, as though following steps in some steamy Latino Lothario dance he is suddenly about to break into with Cynthia – who would then burst through the doors in fish-net stockings, dragging her chair behind her and smirking. Of course he was probably just steadying his nerves.

Another oddity about Charles are his flights into the realms of paranoia. This becomes particularly evident one year when, in echoes of 1984, rules are changed slightly and all oral examiners have their oral test result sheets sent back to Cambridge, along with the tapes of the oral exams and a signed document saying they'd administered them.

'Signed my death warrant!..' says Charles, zigzagging in and out of the teachers nervously in the common room one day. He begins to say it so often that it becomes almost like Paul Revel's cry – 'The English are coming!'

You'd be relaxing in the common room, which is almost like a decompression chamber after the highly stressful business of interviewing a succession of

candidates, downing a much-needed mug of coffee, looking forward to some light banter, when in would march Charles, not jaded in the least by the constant questioning, oh no, not he, and he'd begin to chirp up and down the room –

'Well, that's it folks! … been nice knowing you all… a momentous day for me… yes sir!.. ... I've just signed my death warrant!'

We were all so thoroughly sick of Charles and his blasted death warrant that day that as the exams finished we devised a sort of revenge. A large sheet of A2 was procured and before we left for home, knowing that Charles would hang about, Hilary rapidly scrawled a message on it and left it slap bang in the middle of Charles' desk, where we knew he couldn't miss it. It read –

DEATH WARRANT

For, Charles Worsley,
British Council Teacher.

Be at the Tower of London tomorrow for your beheading.
6. am sharp (like the axe!)

– THE QUEEN.

P.S. As it's formal wear please bring a hat.

CHAPTER 14

TEFL on the borders and going solo

It was just about when the Millennium came that Teresa and I decided to move to our farmhouse which we'd bought back in 1992 after our wedding. This was on the borders of Spain and Portugal, near Valença do Minho. In truth Mother and Father had been a big help with this, Father getting a draughtsman friend of his to review the renovation plans, as the building at the time was little more than a shell.

Increasingly bothered by the pollution near our apartment in Porto, not to mention the daily shunting queues of traffic, we made plans for an escape to the country.

'See you in the Millennium!' shouted a stalwart member of the British social set stepping out of the British Consulate on Porto's *Avenida da Boavista* as I stepped into it. I was renewing my passport so we could go to visit Mother in her house in St.Helens. She was living alone now as sadly we'd lost Father the previous year.

By that time I'd managed to get work in a school over the border in Vigo, Spain, and so, having learned

all the problem areas that Portuguese learners of English encountered for many years, I now had to readapt.

One noticeable difference was that Spanish speakers of English couldn't pronounce the 's' at the beginning of a sentence, a problem which Portuguese speakers didn't have. This was owing to some phonological structure in Spanish which meant that they said things like – 'Mr e-Smith lives in e-Spain.' Only the most proficient speakers could escape this tendency, and so for me, by now used to Portuguese accents, the transition was quite difficult.

The money was also confusing as the Spanish *peseta* was always worth slightly more than the Portuguese *escudo*, and until the advent of the Euro a couple of years later, you found yourself constantly doing calculations when buying things, especially expensive ones.

We turned the three *'terraças'* (terraces) at the back of our house into cultivatable land, growing, amongst others, potatoes, turnips, onions and cabbages. The many trees we had on our land also provided us with an ample supply of apples, pears, peaches and oranges and the like. Under protest from me, we acquired a dog, 'Tom', a Golden Retriever who – apart from his utility as a guard dog – as Teresa was quick to point out, soon showed that he had great potential as a perambulating dirt and dust-spreading device for inside the house which, as there was enough of it outside, we didn't particularly need.

If there was an upheaval in my life there was also in Teresa's, who had to switch schools three times before she found the right one.

The school where I worked in Vigo was a prime example of the exploitation meted out to young people, and not so young like myself, who dared to imagine they could see a bit of the world and have a good time. The whole organisation was riven with endemic mistrust and cynicism from top to bottom. You only entered the school after a video camera had checked out who you were beforehand downstairs, and even then, it seemed, only reluctantly.

The compulsory meetings once a week were a bore of gargantuan proportions, led by a DOS (Director of Studies) so devoid of any real signs of life you could have imagined him having been transported to the meeting in a hearse and reanimated on the spot.

Les, as he was called, even moved around at these meetings like a ghost, springing up without warning at your side to check upon what you were writing, or that you were writing at all, which under the suffocating circumstances, was difficult to do.

Like this teachers were obliged to have hours lopped off their urgent lives, which had so many more useful uses to be put to, as Les, that dour, dreary, funereal DOS Les, read endless pages of teachers' manuals to us, as though in his own mind, if you repeated an idea enough, by some process a magician would be familiar with, it passed into practice. Nothing of group participation or teacher-led discussions for Les, he was much too self-important for that, besides he had a captive audience to grind down with his ten best Desert Island Discs of humdrum teaching theories; to flagellate you with until you cried out, 'Stop! … no more!' Only of course nobody

ever did shout out 'stop! …no more' since you had a job to try to preserve.

I was never happier to see the back of a school than that one, and only wished it might sink into the sea of oblivion like Atlantis, but unlike Atlantis rather than become a myth, become a minefield with a sign clearly saying, 'TEFL teachers Keep Out!'

A year after moving up to the border from Porto I was therefore once again looking for some kick-start to my TEFL career, annoyed in part at myself for abandoning the job security of Porto for a flimsy notion of pursuing a dream of the country idyll, refreshing though it was to begin with.

It was after that first year 'out in the sticks' that I determined that I would open my own school. I called it 'Reaction English,' and within two weeks in the late summer of 2001, I had a plush-looking school front and was ready for business.

I was in a town called Arcos. Arcos was predominantly an agricultural town, so people were at first reluctant to trade cabbages for the delights of exercising the inner cranium, although slowly I brought them round with staged dramas, and every Christmas a British-style pantomime, of which I was inevitably Widow Twankey, Buttons and Dick Whittington all rolled into one. Students started enrolling in increasing numbers so that by the end of my first year I had thirty – not bad for someone intent on building a school. Then the bombshell dropped in the form of the Portuguese government making the teaching of English compulsory

at primary school level. The knock-on effect was immediate, and straight away numbers dwindled. The pumpkin of my little school – you're 'wee wheel' as a Scottish friend called it – had been transforming into a golden carriage, and was now reverting back to a pumpkin again.

But the drain was gradual and most loyal students of course stayed. Mother would bring Union Jack bunting over from St.Helens and things like pocket diaries, and pens, which came in handy for giving out as spot prizes or as Christmas presents. Yet owning your own school brought awkward customers.

Costa was a 10-year old boy shaped like a helium balloon. He often came to school gliding on his scooter, like a willing but overweight nymph come to classes. Costa's father ran a profitable chicken-decapitating business in the town (they even supplied as far a field as Lisbon), which gave Costa ideas above his station. He seemed to believe that because his parents were wealthy, he could behave in any way he wanted, and at times I had difficulty in getting him to shut up. One day matters came to a head.

'I don't pay for this!' bawled Costa, banging his podgy pink fist on the desk in front of me. He turned on his heels and stormed off on his scooter to the head-decapitating farm. All this because I'd asked him to 'shut up!'

Later that day his mother arrived in my reception, wringing her hands apologetically.

'If only you knew *'professor'* (teacher, though in England pupils of course say 'sir') how impossible Costa

is at home… sometimes I just don't know what to do with him.' I felt like saying she might start with an upbringing.

Inevitably Costa's umbrage at being shouted down was insurmountable, and his little scooter stopped no more outside the school – not that I was sorry to see him go I have to say.

But the Costa incident seemed to precipitate a general rot, begun with the government's decision to make English free at primary school level, and from where I drew most of my students, and so, one by one, as in some Hans Christian Anderson tale only in reverse, the students started dropping away.

In reality the school had been a difficult ship for me to keep afloat for some time, since the difficulty I had in getting payment from some of the parents was the stuff of legends.

There was one woman, a Dona Alicia, who clearly saw me as the head of some benevolent charity landed in her midst for her convenience, since she would typically be months in arrears with payment. Indeed when I finally did close down the school, she topped a short list of parents from whom I never did receive payment.

'They create the embarrassment, but you feel embarrassed,' was Mother's succinctly accurate assessment of the situation.

'Couldn't you go freelance?' said Teresa to me one day, as I was weighing up what to do next with my TEFL career. Reluctantly I plodded the streets of Vigo again in search of work.

Veronica, an Irish woman, was a lead I was given by a friend in Porto as someone who might be able to give me a job. Veronica had a school centrally in Vigo, besides, said my friend, Veronica knew *everyone* in Vigo.

I duly got in touch with Veronica, who invited me to a meeting for the Cambridge exams, which she was organising at the Excelsior Hotel in Vigo. It should be interesting to see the Spanish version of the Cambridge exams I thought to myself.

Before the meeting I happened to be walking down a street in Vigo in my new suit when a very strange incident occurred. A man behind began following me, calling out to me in Spanish. I briefly turned around, but as I didn't recognise him from Adam I speeded up. Before long I was weaving in and out of the crowds thronging Vigo's wide thoroughfare, the '*Gran Via,*' trying to avoid this stranger with him – just as equally determined so it seemed – to get a hold of me.

I must have resembled an actor doing a remake of *The Third Man,* with me in the starring role as the pursued Harry Lime.

'Oyé!… oyé!,' (Hey!... hey!) he cried out to me as I darted into the *Corte Ingles* (one of Spain's plush department stores) with him hot on my trail, hoping to shake him off, only I hadn't, and by now he was stalking me up the escalators – there was no escape!

'Mira!... mira!' (look!… look!), said the very inoffensive-looking middle-aged man as he finally drew level with me going up the escalators.

He indicated to me two large and conspicuous white cotton cross-stitches on the tails of my brand new jacket!

They were the type used to keep the form of brand new clothes. He'd wanted to warn me that I'd forgotten to take them out! It was lucky he'd pointed this out, otherwise I'd have gone to the Cambridge meeting looking like someone who might get out of bed in the morning to go to work in his pyjamas – fat chance of a job there. I thanked him profusely.

At the Excelsior Hotel the atmosphere was very charged. Soon the gabbling crowd was herded into a long conference room through a plastic concertina-type shutter door, where a man called Mitch, who was from Cambridge, stood up to address the by now quiescent crowd.

He ploughed on pressingly through the umpteen successful methods for staging the Cambridge exams, supporting his theory with slides, over-head projections and sometimes what looked suspiciously like wild guesses. Then it came to the 'fielding any questions' part of his talk.

Veronica – obviously an irrepressible woman when it came to the art of conversation – quizzed Cambridge's hapless ambassador ceaselessly with every conceivable question related to the Cambridge exams.

'Could you get them interviewed in threes Mitch?' she asked searchingly.

'Er, well…'

'How about in fours…? or fives maybe?'

'Er, yes, possibly…' said Mitch, looking decidedly uncomfortable – he was by now almost circling on his feet, clearly thrown off course by Veronica's barrage of questions.

'Now, has anybody got any more questions?' he asked, desperate for a taker who wasn't Veronica. His luck was in because he got one. Somebody asked him about the different feeder-questions that the examiner should have ready to gauge candidates' fluency.

'Ah, yes… ' said Mitch, looking relieved, '… I'm glad you asked that.' He produced a photocopy of set questions that examiners might choose from, waving it triumphantly in the air. 'I think you have a copy in front of you.'

'Any order there Mitch?' asked Veronica, feeling she'd been quiet for far too long, even though it was only seconds.

Mitch looked suddenly uncomfortable again, as if his time off the ropes from Veronica had not been time enough. Clearly Veronica didn't agree though.

'I mean Mitch, maybe start with the most difficult ones … you know… see if you can gauge their English in one, sort of thing… catch them off their guard… if you know what I mean … then slacken to the easier ones, yes?' said Veronica, her eyes expanding widely, and looking greatly satisfied with herself, as well she might – she was effectively taking over Mitch's job!

'Er, y-e-s…' muttered Mitch unsure of himself, aware that he didn't want to dismiss any suggestions out of hand, even idiotic ones like Veronica's. '… always a possibility I suppose…' he said archly, giving the nod to anybody with half a brain that the idea was complete rubbish. 'However…' he said, trying to get into his stride once more – which some would say he'd never got fully into anyway – '…. you can do anything with

these questions in fact… thematically speaking… pick and choose… mix and match…' – this was a long-winded way of saying, 'mix up the questions.'

'*Right*...! we're having a break now,' bawled Veronica, stopping Mitch in mid-sentence, who looked as though he could use one.

The concertina-type shutter doors were folded open, and I stepped out into much fresher air with Veronica.

'*What*!.. *no coffee*! It should have been here ages ago!..' Veronica roared.

A stream of expletives followed, as Veronica revealed a penchant for swearing that was alarming. The girl wearing the apron holding the tray of empty cups quaked in her shoes, looking as though she could translate Veronica's choice words simply by the bad vibes around. Veronica should really get together with Mr. Rogel I thought, together they could turn the air blue.

Shortly after the disastrous Cambridge meeting in Vigo (the coffee did eventually arrive!) I was offered a job which consisted mostly of teaching in firms around Vigo. I never got to know if Veronica was involved since I did not work for her, perhaps it was just some lucky contact I'd made that day.

As the Noughties rolled relentlessly on I got to quite like my job, darting around difficult areas of Vigo, a real travelling salesman of the English Language I was at last.

Meanwhile Teresa was putting her time to good use by taking up a hobby she didn't really have space for in

the apartment – abstract painting. Sara and Sophie became accustomed to life in the countryside and the freedom it offered, and were quick to say there was *no way* they'd go back to Porto to be hemmed in.

It was in this frame of mind that I decided to visit old friends again in Turin. Giovanni had visited us briefly in the Nineties, but I felt a reunion was long overdue, ditto Maria Teresa Morrelli.

I took a Ryanair flight out to Bergamo and spent a few days with Giovanni and his family in Mondovi. He was still working at FIAT, and still walking and skiing in the mountains of Piedmont in synchronicity with the seasons.

We made the most of my short stay, although Mondovi's Carnival, which I thought the best in the world, was slightly marred by a falling blanket of snow which, while being picturesque, made watching the *sfilata* (procession) hand-clappingly cold. The garishly-dressed figures past on their floats, twisting and turning, a festival of the passing years.

As I left Mondovi station, from where I was to visit Maria-Teresa and Georgio again in Turin before leaving for Portugal, I noticed for the first time, a small tuft of grey in Giovanni's otherwise uniformly brown hair.

In Turin Maria-Teresa was surprised to hear from me, despite my asking her for her telephone number by e-mail before setting off, which, I suppose, was my slightly oblique way of saying I'd be coming.

But I must come round, dinner was ready for me, said Maria-Teresa when I phoned from Turin. It was a pleasant reminder of the Italian sense of hospitality

which, living in Portugal, while not being an inhospitable country itself, I'd almost forgotten about.

We spent a wonderful afternoon getting up to speed on the events that had occurred in our respective lives since. They'd moved from their sumptuous apartment in the *Corso Duca Degli Abruzzi* to a much smaller, simpler apartment further out from the city centre. Maria-Teresa complained that she still missed her old house, an observation which Georgio saw as his cue to remind her that the apartment had been too big for them, and anyway they weren't getting any younger. It seemed clear that this was a wound that was re-opened from time to time. Also, they'd become grandparents, something they'd long awaited, and I couldn't think of a couple more deserving of their hearts' desire.

Soon it was time to go. By now it was snowing heavily and so Georgio insisted on accompanying me to Turin's *Porta Nuova* railway station where I'd catch the train to Bergamo the plane and Portugal.

At the station I waved goodbye to Georgio through snowflakes, falling like the minutes of a lost time that were Turin days. The once bouncy, energetic middle-aged doctor I'd first met on arriving to teach in Turin, now looked much frailer in early old age, and I smiled to myself as I recollected Maria-Teresa saying how I might re-train and become Georgio's assistant at the hospital, in those oh, oh, so far-off days at the Runneymede Summer School.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:31 Page 186

CHAPTER 15

Twenty years on, and a reprise of summer school

As it was 2009, and exactly twenty years since I'd last done a stint at summer school in Southport, I decided to relive the summer school experience once again. Not this time at the Runneymede Summer School, since that was no longer in existence, but at some other summer school.

In fact I had done four weeks the previous year, in a Gothic castle, with panoramic views over a vale of green to a place called 'Thorpe Park', a theme park not far outside London, which itself was only a short hop away on the train, and Windsor castle being only ten mile's distance.

I'd had my own room high up in the Gothic castle, which year-round served as a college of further education whose students I could well imagine gazing out at the amazing views from the window, just as I did. That would have been a great place to revisit summer school twenty years on, to have a reprise of that experience which brought me babbling Japanese, eager-to-learn and highly-organised Chinese, not to mention the usual hybrid of Europeans, with their broad wash of

accents and idiosyncratic behaviour patterns. But it was not to be.

I was mentally going through the colourful pageant of endearingly odd individuals I was bound to bump into again this year at the Gothic castle, teachers and pupils alike, when an inexplicable urge, like an alarm going off in my head, led me to check my e-mails.

By now I had become a compulsive checker of e-mails anyway, impatient to see if Giovanni had some nugget of news from Italy, or Peter and Anna from England, or Maria-Teresa and Georgio from Turin – all of whom were now on the e-mail.

It was not that I was expecting to receive an e-mail from the summer school operating from the Gothic castle – they'd already e-mailed me the previous day to tell me my room was ready for me (hopefully the same one) – it was more a case of being prepared for any eventuality, besides, I thought, they might write to me about something or other, which indeed, they had – though it certainly wasn't the something or other I was expecting.

I stared at the computer screen as I read the message again and again, to make sure it wasn't some silly sort of prank, stowing away on the back of some perfectly sane e-mail perhaps, and popping outrageously into my in-box? But it wasn't. The message ran –

'I am writing to you to withdraw the offer of work with…' (…'Jokers Unlimited Summer Schools' is what it might have said!) '… this is owing to an unexpected

reduction in our enrolments, especially from Greece and the Far East, owing to fears over Swine Flu. As our other centres are similarly affected…

It might as well have said – '… you've no chance there mate!'

Once I'd recoiled at the shock, made the worse by thinking that somebody obviously saw e-mail as a fit vehicle for the appliance of a battering ram to ram home a message of this sensitive nature, I saw my reprise of twenty years of summer school sinking fast into the mud of the Wash, like King John's jewels, if not quite Olban's faithful coracle, which no doubt would have skimmed along it speedily.

As much out of indignation as any hope that they'd change their minds, I rang the contact number at the bottom of the e-mail – answerphone, well no surprises there!

I e-mailed Peter about this breath-taking set back of the day, and unsurprisingly received not only sympathy but advice – *'Nil Carborundum Illegitimi,'* he wrote which, he said, if his schoolboy Latin served him correctly, translated to – 'don't let the bastards grind you down!'

I sat down and wondered what to do next. With two weeks to go it was too late to start anywhere else, wasn't it? All the posts would be filled, surely? Yet Peter's boost of not letting the bastards grind you down made me determined that I wouldn't. I'd get on that phone and find summer school work, provided the whole of

the UK hadn't come to a grinding halt with swine flu that is – a preposterous idea!

The landing of a job at a summer school in Gloucestershire after the creeps that operated the Gothic castle had sent their, if not 'Gothic' then at least Bram Stoker-style e-mail to me two days previously, was a great tonic to my system. At last! – the 'Twenty Years On Tour' was on, and despite the dismissive missive from Dracula's den, I could be reliving some of the immense pleasures that teaching English can offer, like the Italian lady in Oxford last summer when I was still working for 'Vlad The Impaler Summer Schools Inc' at the Gothic castle.

'Sbagliato,' (wrong) in Italian can be correctly applied if you want to say, for example, that you caught the wrong bus, an incident which this fidgety Italian lady was most keen to convey to me to explain how they'd all caught the wrong bus to see some destination or other last year. (Perhaps the Impaler summer school was trying to sneak them back to some place not for a bite to eat – as they might reasonably expect – but a *bite*?)

Anyway, went on this gallopingly animated lady as she showered her arms about in the air, the whole problem was that, 'the bus was wronged.'

In my head I ticked off another glorious TEFL howler to add to my already substantial list of them – we know that Othello was wronged by Iago, but did you know that a bus can be wronged? – you learn something every day.

The induction meeting of 'the Renaissance Summer School' group was a somewhat jumbled affair, which I

suppose it had to be given that almost a hundred teachers were all chaperoned into one spot. There were forms to be signed, qualifications to be checked, it was a bit like being called up must have felt like. They only really omitted to check our teeth, like horses.

Then there was the induction itself; a Victorian slide show of scenarios never to get into (or 'always' to get into) with students – all done with Powerpoint.

It is a system which Katie, the *Obersleutenant* of Renaissance, can't properly work out, and so is forced to do one half of *Top Hat* (the Ginger Rogers part) because of it, while Lewis, her second lieutenant, dances around the room with the remote control, doing the Fred Astaire part of the act, until it decides to play ball, the computer starts, and they're both let off the hook.

I think I fall asleep during this presentation, but I shall never really know since after twenty years in TEFL I have perfected a sort of glazed absence look on such occasions, whereby it looks as if I'm present in the conscious world, but prudence dictates that you shouldn't push a point, and perhaps prod me first in my chair in case I fall out of it, like a false legionnaire on the tower of a fort in *Beau Geste.*

'Is that alright Bill?' asks Katie, startling me awake.

'No questions,' I say, since that's what she's obviously asking me – let the younger ones navigate the St. John's Bay of windy inlets going everywhere for a change I say, they'll certainly have enough questions after their first week I think to myself as I wonder when I'll get my first opportunity to *really* nod off.

Already it is clear that summer school is not the freewheeling event it was in those far-off days at Southport. There are too many rules designed to ensure its success, which only seems to conspire to guaranteeing its failure, like, for example, 'The Incident Form.'

The Incident Form is something you fill in if you see anything suspicious Katie tells us. Going out of the meeting I spot a discarded piece of electricians' cable sticking out of an overflowing waste paper basket and momentarily contemplate – as I'm coming out of the meeting – if I should perhaps not go back and ask to fill out an incident form?

The arrival of we little band of teachers – we *un*happy few – as the driver had got lost, and taken ages to find the place, is not, it seems, expected at 'the Marlowe School', where we are to teach.

The Marlowe School is a fully-functioning Independent school year-round, set in the beautiful rolling Cotswolds hills, just outside Gloucester.

As the mini-bus bearing us trundles up the drive we are goose-necked at by lost-looking clumps of parents, and it soon becomes apparent what's happened – we have stumbled across the school's end-of-term open day.

'Oh, wasn't expecting you now!' says Arthur, the school's uniformed and slightly senile-looking security guard, who insists we call him 'Art.'

'You can call me Art if you want,' he says, '… because there's certainly an art to keeping this lot in check,' he

chuckles, with an air about him of having seen it all before.

We get out of the mini-bus to stretch our legs (it's been a long trip from the induction in Richmond near London), but are soon back in again and heading for the Holiday Inn in Gloucester, where we'll have to stay overnight as the school isn't ready for us – so much for the induction day's emphasis on 'organisation!'

Coming down into the breakfast room the next morning I notice two men, one in his forties, the other in his fifties, sat chatting to three of the younger teachers I remember from the meeting in Richmond. 'How nice!' I think – their parents are obviously bidding them good luck on what is probably their first work experience. It turns out that this is Steve and George, two of the very small group of which I am also one, of over-forties teachers.

Steve is pale and frail-looking, and has been on the dole for years, I soon come to believe from what he says, that this is his one chance in the year to work. George is a tremendous bore who never listens to anybody, always sprouting outlandish opinions and complaining how he, 'shouldn't really be here,' as he's far too over-qualified.

I was to get to know them both very well as when we are finally allowed back into the Marlowe school the next day I find myself billeted with them.

The students arrive in dribs and drabs, the first being Diana, a tall, swarthy-looking Greek girl from Thessaloniki.

She passes through a check-in system which wouldn't have disgraced Immigration on Ellis Island.

The noise level immediately racks up when a group of Italians arrive, seemingly drowning out their own questions – of which there are many – by the decibel level at which they are pitched, and which multiply as with some spontaneous wave of nervous energy.

Adrianne, a young, muscly, sporty type of teacher in charge of sports, starts to get wobbly. 'It's not going well… they're not doing as they're told.' It is her first experience of summer school, or 'camp' as it is apparently called nowadays, and she has a lot to learn, since summer school can basically be described as, 'a bunch of kids not doing what they're told to do when away from home school.'

Katie had explained to us at the induction that we have a responsibility of 'pastoral care' (a new term from Southport days), which involves looking after students. What she doesn't say is that this is nearer to the literal meaning of a sheppard and his flock, as teachers find themselves in the weeks ahead wildly searching for their 'flock' (the students) because they've run amok among the pastures (the school), and are nowhere to be found. At Southport we simply called this, 'keeping an eye on your students,' although admittedly that doesn't sound quite so professional.

Following the Italians come the French, then the Spanish, but not herded into a gym like at Southport, but rather passed down a line of individuals (first passports then valuables), like fish waiting to be filleted.

Soon the footballs are out, and the fields of the

Marlowe School are filled with flocks of sheep (students) bleating in every conceivable language but English and asking the teachers where they are – as often as not also *not* in English.

It is not long before swine flu, possibly thinking it has located a soft target where so much confusion – and therefore lack of precaution – abounds, takes a hold and the summer school goes into shock. In only the second week, Bjorn, a beanpole-tall Swedish boy from Stockholm, goes down with it. He'd been cheerfully chatting up the girls on the tennis courts the day before, the same girls who are now frantically scrubbing their hands because they'd swopped racquets with him. Poor Bjorn is quarantined to his room for the rest of his stay – more learning medicine-related language than anything, such as '*are you feeling any better*?' and '*tablets taken twice a day*'– during which time he is sometimes visited by his fellow students, they having drawn lots beforehand.

A policy of 'clean it, bin it, kill it,' is postered up on all the walls over the school's rambling campus, but without pictures making the less able speakers of English wonder if they've enrolled in an army cadet camp.

Luke, the Renaissance School's DOS (Director of Studies) immediately goes into a flap when he hears of the first case of swine flu amongst the students, calling an emergency meeting in the Assembly Hall to discuss it, not thinking that a close accumulation of warm bodies is probably just what the bug has been praying for. Not unsurprisingly the next day more students think they're showing symptoms.

A doctor is consulted and students are told to take

paracetamol if they think they have swine flu, not tamyflu, which apparently will do much the same thing. The result of this is that many students are wandering around campus feeling their necks. I can't help feeling that the school is using the paracetamol recommendation as a delaying tactic to get students back home in case they *do* have swine flu, thereby effectively exporting a problem – EU co-operation is a wonderful thing!

'I shouldn't be doing this!' complains George, as he coasts into his class early. George's class room is near a store room which we're all in since it's doubling up as a makeshift teachers' room. We hear his every mumble as, grumpily, he enters the room, preening his shiny ponytail beforehand.

'Good morning!' he says wearily as he dumps his books on the table and begins class.

If George is disillusioned with his contract it's nothing to the shock he, I and Steve – being on the same floor of the same hall of residence – are about to get the next day.

I am reminded of the term 'pastoral care,' first used by Katie at the induction meeting, a concept whereby, basically, you are asked to see your relationship with your students as being like the relationship between sheppard and his sheep.

The pastoral care term is not used lightly, but I'm not sure even a sheppard has to sleep with his flock as we're expected to with this group of Italian boys who by now, perhaps with the furore created by the arrival of swine flu – or perhaps in spite of it – are intent on

disruption in the hall of residence where we all are.

It's the end of a tiring first week and I am awoken by shouting's equivalent of a Mexican wave, as extremely loud yells come from the next room.

As I step out in my pyjamas I see Steve and George, in a similar state of undress, looking wildly around at the door from behind where all the noise is coming.

'*O-pen* the door!' says Steve.

He repeats this umpteen times, in fact so many times that I slump off back to bed, but the door still doesn't open, and still the racket continues.

None of us gets a wink of sleep that night, and I greet Steve the next day at breakfast with pirate's black eye sockets.

'It's not funny isn't this Bill,' he says, looking jaded. 'I'm speaking to Graham about it.'

Graham is the top of the command chain with Renaissance, and Steve does speak to him, but all cracks have to be sealed over it seems, and we all think it's a pity the same can't be done with masking tape over unruly Italians' mouths. The students are warned they *may* be sent home, but it doesn't seem to have much effect.

'Luke I can't stay in that room a day longer,' I say to the DOS the next day, as after three nights of feeling as though I've stumbled into the film set of H.G.Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, complete with mixed screaming voices, I decide to vent my displeasure. Though I do not realise it as I'm saying it, I suppose it does come across as a bit of an ultimatum.

Fortunately Luke sees my side of the argument (who

wouldn't?), but even then, to my astonishment, he seems a little begrudging.

'You see Bill, it's supposed to be about pastoral care…'

My response to that is that if those Italians had been my sheep I'd have sold them at market long ago – though of course I do not say so.

I am given a key to a room on the top floor of the same hall of residence where I'm staying, far from the madding crowd, up in the rafters. Nobody knows I am there except Luke, and that's the way I want it as I need a decent night's sleep.

Consequently I am walking around campus for the next two weeks with two keys in my pocket – one to the room where I am officially supposed to be, but am not, and the other one to a room where I'm not supposed to be, but am.

'Oh, you're there!' says George, flouncing his ponytail as he spies me slipping into what has now become my surrogate room, which I sporadically visit in little raiding sorties to filch things from there like a packet of biscuits or something I need for one of my classes, my things having by now become a bit like Robinson Crusoe's things when he first finds himself marooned on the desert island – some on the island, and some back on the ship stranded on the reef.

'Blimey, you're a rare bird these days!' says Steve, who is also puzzled by my less frequent sightings.

It seems Steve has come up with his own solution to a disrupted night's sleep – unofficially of course like me – by kipping down on the television room's settee

downstairs without anybody knowing, apart from me now. That leaves only George who, despite buying earplugs from Boots, emerges tetchy and wild-eyed in the mornings.

No other teachers around campus are having these problems as we are, some even complain of only getting to sleep at two o'clock in the morning – oh, what luxury!

Every manner of threat is used against this band of renegade black sheep when finally one night one of them sets off the fire alarm and all the floors of the hall of residence where we are have to be evacuated because smoke is everywhere, not from a fire but a fire-extinguisher, which gives off a gauzy, foul-smelling mist.

George comes spluttering out on to the lawn as the mist has clogged up his lungs.

Now I'm wondering if what he's saying is true – he really shouldn't be here.

That's the final straw for one of the Italian boys, who is identified as the main mischief-maker and, not before time, sent home.

'There was a girl last year, and she nearly died when a fire extinguisher was set off in her face by another student!' gasps Elaine, the DOS of 'the Maypole Summer School.' 'She had a collapsed lung and had to be rushed to hospital.'

One of the great oddities of the Marlowe School is that it has two summer schools operating from it simultaneously. What is even odder is that Maypole is owned by Renaissance, so while the two schools have their own separate course books, sports equipment and class rooms (about which teachers can get quite stupidly

territorial) they are in fact, one and the same company, working in perfect *dis*harmony. This works as a blight to organisation for things like photocopies (of which there are mountains), students' lists, schedules, travel and lesson plans – all of which, at some time or other, get mixed up. It is the educational equivalent of, *Where's Wally?* with teachers looking frantically for an all-too-familiar logo on pieces of paper.

This bizarre side-by-side existence is nowhere better illustrated than when I try to get an extra two week's work once my short teaching contract is up. Though it's a wonder after such upheavals, the truth is that by now I'm quite attached to my little surreptitious room with its perfectly-framed view out over the Cotswolds countryside, not to mention the wonders of nearby Gloucester and Bristol for a day's shopping or sight-seeing – besides now the Italians have gone back home.

Although my students are enjoying my classes they tell me – just as I am enjoying teaching them – I have to conclude that my showdown with Luke over the 'room that rocked,' as some might describe it, plus my bolt-hole in the sky that must have somehow got back to Katie, is the real reason why I don't get offered further work. But if for whatever reason Renaissance don't want to know me, I figure that perhaps their ugly sister, Maypole might, and I plan how to get more work there.

During these last few days at the Marlowe School, as students drift back to their own countries, I find myself lapping up the teachers' banter, as living out in the sticks in Portugal, not surprisingly, I don't get to partake in it very much.

Alec is a tall figure with a retro-style Beatle haircut and long sideburns. He keeps himself to himself and I've no idea what he does at the summer school, apart from the fact that he works for Maypole.

Rebecca, an attractive willowy girl doing post-graduate studies in Chemistry at Durham, says she's so enjoyed summer school she wants to travel and teach English for a year, and so suspending her studies.

Clearly, reckons George, her classes have been 'planted' otherwise she wouldn't be saying this he thinks, and, anyway, how come he didn't get good students since, as he reminds everybody for the umpteenth time – *'he shouldn't really be here.'*

I am unfortunate enough to be sitting next to George, not having spotted him in time, as I wander around the Marlowe School refectory with my tray.

'Well I'm worried that they're going to use this as an excuse not to pay me,' says George, as he ear-aches Steve about the fire-extinguisher episode and its possible repercussions on his pay packet as he sees it.

I think he's being a little too paranoiac and, needless to say, so it proves to be. However on one point I do agree with George – about the only one – and that is in his deeply rooted suspicion of the free-wheeling TEFL world, since I know of no medieval map so full of signs saying, 'here be monsters' than you'll find on the map of Teflonia. There are some endearing beings in it deifnitely, but there are also monsters.

'I should write a book!' says George, 'all my friends tell me I should write a book!' he says, as he walks off across the lawns a little while later towards his lonely room. He

should get a good night's sleep tonight, now the ring leader of the Italian tearaways is well off the scene.

'Always philosophising that guy,' grumbles Steve, as he too takes off to prepare classes.

I go off campus to ring the number that Steve has given me for the director of the Maypole schools who, Steve thinks, might be able to help me with work.

The voice on the other end of the phone sounds vaguely familiar as he tells me that he, *might* have some work for me, but that if I don't hear from him in a couple of days it's because he hasn't – he hasn't.

Back in the refectory that evening I am still thinking about how familiar the voice on the phone sounded when I turn round to the figure sat next to me and understand why – of course! –it's Alec, he was the voice on the phone, he must be the recruitment guy for Maypole!

I suppress the temptation of whispering in his ear, as in some well-known spoof television series – 'listen carefully… I shall say this only once.'

While over in England, and before returning to Portugal, I go around a few shops to get reactions to a new type of collapsible music stand I have invented, which I've called 'Flexistand.' Disappointingly the reactions are lukewarm. So great has my fascination become for inventing things in recent years I seem to be constantly dreaming up ideas for inventions. One day perhaps I'll invent a way of learning languages which doesn't involve teachers and course books. I can only think that this is another frontier to cross, to see where it leads me.

No trip to England is complete without a visit to see

Mother, who is about to turn eighty-three. I go to see her in her home at 'Lakeview' in St.Helens, where she's been ever since the onset of dementia forced her there some years ago. We'll have a pleasurable chat, and I'll play my clarinet for everyone, which I've brought with me. Yet I know that five minutes after I've left Mother will have forgotten that I've been.

I am walking down Prescott Road into St.Helens. The bus driver, who has pulled up for awaiting passengers, is looking at me blankly, wondering why I'm not willing to pay a pound to go into town. He doesn't understand that it's not the pound, it's a sentimental stroll at stake.

I pass Miss Peat's, where at ten I had elocution lessons to improve my spoken English, which at the time I called 'execution lessons.' I pass down Cropper's Hill to see the tall spire of Beecham's Clock Tower ahead of me – the pride and joy of the St.Helens-based Beecham's pills firm.

I pass through countless streets and corners that all trigger off some distant memory or other. In a way this is like a land – a land of past things, quite as strange as any of the countries I've lived and worked in.

Nostalgia is such a strange phenomenon, and of itself quite useless I'm sure, but still I'm greatly affected by the sights I see. It's like Mother with an old song she knows, and will sing along to as I cheerfully play the clarinet; a song of which every word is perfect, all the phrasing exact, but a song whose title she can no longer remember.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:31 Page 203

AFTER WORD

Dorothy, Mother's friend, recently told me that Noel, her brother-in-law, who was a professional upholsterer by trade, made up several of the car head-rests referred to in Chapter 1, and that my father sold, 'a few.'

The near-war situation between Greece and Turkey in 1987, mentioned in Chapter 5, did indeed go down in the history books, and is known as, 'the Sismik Incident.'

A prototype of 'Flexistand,' mentioned in Chapter 15, only awaits my enthusiasm for selling – if one day I can manage to muster it up again, which at the moment seems doubtful – so that perhaps, one day, I can bring to a wider audience the facets of this most unusual type of music stand.

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:31 Page 4

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:31 Page 5

RobyLayout_Layout 1 04/03/2011 09:31 Page 16